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# Comparing Alternative U.S. Counterterrorism Strategies

## Can Assumption-Based Planning Help Elevate the Debate?

Robert J. Lempert, Horacio R. Trujillo, David Aaron,  
James A. Dewar, Sandra H. Berry, Steven W. Popper



The RAND Frederick S. Pardee Center  
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4570 Fifth Avenue, Suite 600, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2665  
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## Preface

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This briefing describes the use of assumption-based planning (ABP) to compare alternative U.S. counterterrorism strategies. ABP is a RAND-developed approach to strategic planning that helps decisionmakers rigorously scan for potential vulnerabilities in their plans. This briefing describes the first application of ABP to compare assumptions across alternative plans. In addition, this document reports on a series of workshops with expert and lay participants that tested the ability of ABP to facilitate discussions of contentious policy issues within diverse groups.

This briefing should be of interest to policymakers, policy analysts, and private-sector decisionmakers interested in planning approaches that can help identify significant and vulnerable assumptions underlying an organization's plans. This document should also be of interest to organizations that wish to facilitate discussions of contentious policy issues, such as terrorism, among groups of experts and the general public.

The research reported here was conducted under the auspices of the RAND Frederick S. Pardee Center for Longer Range Global Policy and the Future Human Condition. This briefing results from the RAND Corporation's continuing program of self-initiated research. Support for such research is provided, in part, by donors and by the independent research and development provisions of RAND's contracts for the operation of its U.S. Department of Defense federally funded research and development centers. Such independent research and development funds supported the expert workshops described here. Support for the lay workshop was provided by International Programs within the RAND National Security Division.

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Inquiries regarding the Pardee Center may be directed to the following address:

Robert J. Lempert,  
Director  
RAND Pardee Center

1700 Main Street  
Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138  
310-393-0411, ext. 6217  
Robert\_Lempert@rand.org  
<http://www.rand.org/pardee>

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## Summary

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At the dawn of the 21st century, the United States faces numerous, significant, long-term, and novel challenges, not the least of which is countering the threat from today's virulent new strain of terrorism. Frequently, both expert decisionmakers and lay citizens have trouble assessing alternative strategies to address such issues because of the emotions they engender and of the deep uncertainty involved. For instance, is the struggle against terrorism more similar to a war or to a police action? Are recalcitrant allies a distraction or a valuable sounding board encouraging the United States to modify faulty plans? Is restraint a dangerous weakness or a vital strength? There seems to be insufficient evidence to end the debate on such questions any time soon.

RAND has a long history of developing and employing methods for addressing such questions and distilling complex policy problems into their essential trade-offs. One such approach, assumption-based planning (ABP), focuses on identifying and addressing the key assumptions and thus the key vulnerabilities underlying an organization's plans. ABP not only offers a qualitative approach widely useful in its own right but has also provided the foundation for a family of new quantitative methods that aim to improve strategic decisionmaking under the conditions of deep uncertainty that characterize the terrorism threat.

In the hands of RAND analysts, ABP has often proved useful in helping clients evaluate and improve their organization's plan. But groups whose members hold conflicting views have not previously used ABP to compare alternative plans. The question thus arises: Can ABP help contentious groups more systematically debate alternative U.S. counterterrorism strategies?

To help address this question, we conducted two sets of workshops using ABP. The first set engaged academic and policymaking experts, testing whether ABP could usefully compare the strengths and weaknesses of alternative strategies and how ABP would perform in a contentious group setting. The second set repeated the experiment with a lay audience that the RAND team assembled in collaboration with the League of Women Voters (the League). The lay workshop employed survey research techniques with the participants to attempt to measure ABP's effect on their debate.

The workshops examined three alternative approaches to counterterrorism: the current U.S. national strategy for combating terrorism, an enhanced law-enforcement and intelligence strategy focusing on terrorism as a criminal activity, and a disengagement and deterrence strategy that focuses on U.S. political withdrawal from Islamic regions of the world and the threat of massive retaliation against any future terrorist attacks. These strategies were chosen to represent a diverse set of responses to the strategic problem that the new terrorism poses and to map well onto a range of different voices in the U.S. political debate.

Applying ABP in the workshops suggested some interesting similarities and differences among the key assumptions underlying the three strategies. For instance, the three make very different assumptions about the nature of the terrorist threat, the availability of U.S. resources, and the extent to which the United States can rely on the cooperation of other nations (see Table S.1).

The workshops also suggest that the strategies share some common assumptions. For instance, both the current U.S. and the law-enforcement strategies assume that a broad consensus among the world's peoples will find terrorism an unacceptable means to pursue any ends. Both these strategies assume that human societies can be improved and that the United States can play a key role in helping other people improve their societies.

Overall, the workshops suggest that all three plans have potentially significant, vulnerable assumptions and that none is robust against failure and surprise.

The workshops also demonstrate that ABP can prove a useful tool for facilitating discussions among experts and lay participants. In particular, we gave written surveys to all participants before and after the lay workshop to measure how they responded to the experience and how it affected their views. While few participants reported any significant change in the strategy they most favored, we found that the workshop helped them dispassionately debate an emotional and complex topic and to deepen their understanding of the strengths and the weaknesses of alternative approaches.

**Table S.1**  
**Assumptions Under Three Strategies**

Area of Assumption	Current U.S. Plan	Enhanced Law Enforcement	Disengagement
Threat	Global terrorist organizations are a critical threat to the U.S. way of life. These organizations garner only narrow support in the Islamic world. They rely on key leaders and resources in a few states.	Terrorism is one threat among many. Terrorists will not gain strength from perceptions of U.S. weakness.	Global terrorist organizations represent a dangerous insurrection opposed to U.S. policy; will respond to changed U.S. policies, not exploit perceived weakness, and be deterred by violence; and are broadly supported in the Islamic world and centered in Islamic lands.
World conditions	Broad consensus will find terrorism unacceptable.	Broad consensus will find terrorism unacceptable. International institutions can be effective.	Costs of changing current policies are low if the United States were to greatly reduce its involvement in the Middle East.
Response of other actors	Others will cooperate with the United States even when they disagree. Democracy reduces the threat. Other governments can contain local threats.	Cooperation can be earned. Other governments can contain local threats.	Other nations and groups respond only to immutable interests; values do not matter.
U.S. capabilities	The U.S. military can rise to any challenge. The United States has few resource constraints. U.S. action can change the behavior of other countries. The U.S. public demands that the government spare no expense to keep it safe.	Law enforcement and intelligence can be effective. U.S. action can change other countries. The U.S. public values civil liberties and will support a nonmilitary response.	The U.S. military can deter and punish. The U.S. public will tolerate reduced Middle East presences and unrestrained violence. U.S. security institutions are not well suited for current threats.

This briefing summarizes the ABP approach, describes each set of workshops and their results, and suggests how future workshops might be improved. While this document focuses on identifying and comparing the key assumptions underlying alternative strategies, it also suggests how ABP and related methods might be used to develop more robust plans than those considered here.

Overall, the workshops suggest that ABP contributes a potentially useful framework for improving public debates about a response to terrorism and for helping the United States address the many significant, long-term, and novel challenges it faces at the dawn of this new century.



## Acknowledgments

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Many people contributed to this effort at least as much as the authors did. Xandra Kayden, a board member of the National League of Women Voters, was instrumental in designing and organizing the lay workshop. Kayden, along with League facilitators Evon Gotlieb and Barbara Inatsugu, intrepidly led ABP breakout groups with only the minimal training we could provide. League recorders Chris Carson, Joanne Leavitt, Liza White, Jean Thomson, Lynn Lowry, Fran Lapides, and Thea Brodtkin expertly captured wide-ranging discussions into concise summaries. Laurie Rennie and Jessica Sung did an excellent job supporting the expert workshops. Amy Tofte masterfully managed the lay-workshop logistics. Judy Larson worked beyond the call of duty to write the materials for the lay workshop, to shepherd me through the process of giving a RAND board briefing based on the expert workshops, and to help prepare the presentation materials for all the workshops. Brian Jenkins gave generously of his time to spellbind the participants in our lay workshop. The many participants at all three workshops eagerly offered their focus, enthusiasm, and patience. We, of course, could not have done this work without them.

Lynn Davis and Thomas McNaugher provided insightful and extremely helpful reviews that substantially improved this document. Richard Neu ran an exceptionally smooth review process. Many thanks to Susan Everingham for providing funds from her program to support the lay workshop and to RAND for providing the IR&D funds that made this effort possible.





## Abbreviations

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ABP	assumption-based planning
the League	League of Women Voters
RDM	robust decisionmaking





**PARDEE CENTER**

**Comparing Alternative  
U.S. Counterterrorism Strategies:  
*Can Assumption-Based Planning  
Help Elevate the Debate?***

**Robert Lempert**

**with Horacio Trujillo, David Aaron, Jim Dewar,  
Sandy Berry, and Steven Popper**

At the dawn of the 21st century, the United States faces numerous, significant, long-term, and novel challenges, not the least of which is countering the threat from today's virulent strain of terrorism. The combination of new levels of destructive power available to individuals; the mobility of people, money, and ideas in our globalized world; and the growth of a religious extremism that justifies mass killing has created a dangerous and difficult-to-suppress threat. Simultaneously, the United States must also confront a range of other significant challenges, from encouraging a free, just, and stable global order to ensuring that the U.S. middle class can thrive in a globalized world.

To date, U.S. public discussion of such issues has not always offered all that might be desired. Frequently fractious and ill focused, current public debate can fall short of framing the

key judgments facing the people of the United States and their leaders. In part, debate about such significant and novel challenges is made more difficult by the deep uncertainty involved. The evidence available to adjudicate among conflicting opinions is often sparse and contradictory. Few reliable precedents are available. While many historical analogies offer themselves, they often present conflicting messages with no clear basis to choose among them. Is the struggle against terrorism more similar to an all-out war or to a police action? Are recalcitrant allies a distraction or a valuable sounding board who can encourage the United States to modify faulty plans? Is restraint a dangerous weakness or a vital strength?

RAND has a long history of developing methods for addressing such questions and distilling complex policy problems into their essential trade-offs. Foundational work on many now-widely used techniques, ranging from operations research to scenarios, originated at RAND. In recent years, RAND has developed a new generation of methods for analyzing and assessing deeply uncertain, novel, often long-term policy challenges. One such approach, assumption-based planning (ABP), focuses on identifying and addressing the key assumptions and thus the key vulnerabilities underlying an organization's plans (Dewar, 2002). ABP not only offers a qualitative approach widely useful in its own right; the method has also provided the foundation for a family of new quantitative methods that aim to improve strategic decisionmaking under conditions of deep uncertainty (Lempert, Popper, and Bankes, 2003).

In the hands of RAND analysts, ABP has often proved useful in helping clients evaluate and improve their organization's plan. But groups whose members hold conflicting views have not used ABP to compare alternative plans. The question thus arises: Can ABP help contentious groups more systematically debate alternative U.S. counterterrorism strategies?

To help address this question, we conducted two sets of workshops that used ABP to assess alternative U.S. counterterrorism strategies. The first set of workshops engaged academic and policymaking experts, testing whether ABP could help compare alternative plans and how the approach would perform in a contentious group setting. The second set of workshops repeated the experiment with a lay audience that the RAND team assembled in collaboration with the League of Women Voters (the League). We used survey research techniques with the participants to attempt to measure ABP's effect on the debate.

Both sets of workshops suggest that formal approaches for addressing deep uncertainty in strategic plans can, in fact, play a constructive role in policy debates among diverse audiences. This briefing describes the ABP approach, each set of workshops, and some suggestions for next steps. This document draws from a talk presented to the RAND board of directors in November 2005 and a workshop cosponsored by RAND and the League in July 2007.

## Many Uncertainties Complicate Assessments of U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy

**The threat of terrorism forces United States to balance risks and goals**

- How serious is the threat?
- What are the most effective ways to address it?
- What must we do to protect ourselves?
- How will others respond to our actions?

**Uncertainty can be both confusing and frightening**

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The United States' post-9/11 attack counterterrorism strategy was laid out in the George W. Bush administration's 2003 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, which defines terrorism as the preeminent threat facing both the United States and the world (EOP, 2003). Not surprisingly, many aspects of this plan have generated much controversy. There has been no shortage of plans put forward as alternatives and no shortage of heated debate advocating one plan or another.

Many difficult-to-estimate uncertainties complicate any assessment of the administration's counterterrorism strategy and potential alternatives. Members of the U.S. public are uncertain about the seriousness of the threat, the most effective ways to address it, and how other nations and peoples will respond to U.S. actions. The level of such uncertainty goes beyond that of many of the reasonably well-understood risks people commonly face in life, such as the risk of heart disease, a car accident, or an earthquake. Today's terrorism confronts the United States with novel, deeply uncertain conditions under which there is little agreement about the likelihood of various events or often the most important factors relating U.S. actions to the potential consequences.<sup>1</sup> Such deep uncertainty can significantly complicate decision-making and policy debates, because it encourages an often volatile mix of fear, overconfidence, aggressiveness, denial, and inaction.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The distinction between well-characterized risk and deep uncertainty goes back as least as far as Knight (1921) and Keynes (1921). For a recent discussion, see Lempert, Popper, and Bankes (2003).

<sup>2</sup> A large body of literature describes the adverse effects of ambiguity on decisionmaking. See Smithson (1989) for a broad review of the psychological literature, Lempert and Popper (2005) for a discussion of policy implications, and Hsu

## ***Workshops Tested Whether RAND Approaches Can Help Contentious Groups Debate Counterterrorism Strategies***

- **Assumption Based Planning (ABP) approach**
  - Can help structure thinking about key assumptions underlying plans
  - Has been used extensively by policy analysts
- **Workshops tested whether ABP could help groups dispassionately compare alternative approaches to U.S. counterterrorism strategy**
  - Assessed ABP with both expert and lay participants

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RAND has been on the forefront of efforts to develop both quantitative and qualitative methods and tools that can help decisionmakers make better decisions under conditions of deep uncertainty.<sup>3</sup> To date, these approaches have largely been used by professional policy analysts to structure and conduct research for government policymakers and other clients. But in recent years, there have also been increasing attempts to use such approaches to facilitate deliberations of groups of stakeholders confronted with making choices under deeply uncertain conditions (Groves et al., 2008).

This briefing examines how well ABP could help contentious groups debate alternative U.S. counterterrorism strategies. We employed ABP because it is a qualitative approach to decision support under conditions of deep uncertainty and one of the simplest to implement and understand. In addition, the quantitative robust decisionmaking (RDM) approach (Lempert, Popper, and Bankes, 2003), the focus of much RAND methodological work in this area, builds on ABP's conceptual framework. Thus in addition to their intrinsic interest, lessons learned about ABP may also be more broadly relevant.

Our research team conducted two sets of workshops. The first examined ABP's ability to facilitate discussions about U.S. counterterrorism strategy among groups of terrorism and

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et al. (2005) for recent neuroscience findings that the rational regions of the brain address risk while the emotional centers address deep uncertainty.

<sup>3</sup> See ISE (2008) for a description of a National Science Foundation–funded effort at RAND that has been a centerpiece of this effort. Others at RAND (see Paul K. Davis et al., 2007, and references therein) have also made contributions.

national-security experts. The second, conducted in collaboration with the League, examined ABP's ability to facilitate such discussions among lay citizens.



## Workshops Examined Vulnerabilities of Three Contrasting Counterterrorism Plans

Type and source of plan	Core characteristics
<i>National Strategy for Combating Terrorism</i> (EOP, 2003)	Conduct offensive operations against terrorists, deny them sanctuary, spread democracy to eliminate their support

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Each of our workshops used ABP to identify the key assumptions underlying three different approaches to U.S. counterterrorism strategy.

The three plans chosen represent a diverse set of approaches to the strategic problem that terrorism poses and map well onto the range of different voices in the U.S. political debate.

The first plan we considered is the 2003 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (EOP, 2003).<sup>4</sup> The plan envisions a broad range of actions, conducted simultaneously, that will attack terrorist networks of global reach, kill their leaders, destroy their infrastructure and communications, and shatter these groups into smaller and weaker entities that local governments can eliminate or contain.

<sup>4</sup> A revised version was published in 2006, after our first set of workshops.

## **The Study Examined Vulnerabilities of Three Contrasting Counterterrorism Plans**

Type and source of plan	Core characteristics
<i>National Strategy for Combating Terrorism</i> (EOP, 2003)	Conduct offensive operations against terrorists, deny them sanctuary, spread democracy to eliminate their support
<b>Enhanced law enforcement and intelligence</b> <i>Terrorism, Freedom, and Security: Winning Without War</i> (Heymann, 2003)	Defeat terrorists with improved intelligence and law enforcement, strengthen international cooperation and domestic support by adhering to due process and protecting civil liberties

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The second plan we call enhanced law enforcement and intelligence. This plan emphasizes law-enforcement and intelligence-gathering actions, both as a more effective approach against the terrorist threat and as a means to exercise the moral leadership necessary to build a strong international consensus against terrorism.

Many commentators advocate such an approach. We took as our specific example the book *Terrorism, Freedom, and Security: Winning Without War* by Harvard law professor Philip Heymann (2003) because, more than most, he provides a reasonably detailed description of the strategy he would pursue.

## **The Study Examined Vulnerabilities of Three Contrasting Counterterrorism Plans**

Type and source of plan	Core characteristics
<i>National Strategy for Combating Terrorism</i> (EOP, 2003)	Conduct offensive operations against terrorists, deny them sanctuary, spread democracy to eliminate their support
Enhanced law enforcement and intelligence <i>Terrorism, Freedom, and Security: Winning Without War</i> (Heymann, 2003)	Defeat terrorists with improved intelligence and law enforcement, strengthen international cooperation and domestic support by adhering to due process and protecting civil liberties
Strategic disengagement and total war <i>Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror</i> (Scheuer, 2004)	Reduce American political intervention in Islamic lands and employ overwhelming violence against those who continue to threaten us

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The third plan we call the disengagement or total war strategy. This plan advocates reducing U.S. political intervention in the Middle East, which, over time, will reduce the terrorists' motivation for attacking the United States. In the interim, this plan sees the United States engaged in a war against a broad-based insurgency, a war that it should prosecute with unrestrained violence. As our specific example for such a plan, we took Michael Scheuer's (2004) book *Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing the War on Terror*.

## ***We Applied RAND's Assumption-Based Planning (ABP) Methodology***

- **ABP aims to improve the robustness and adaptability of strategic plans by reducing avoidable surprises and thereby reducing risk**
- **It focuses on identifying assumptions that are most important to the plan's success and that are most uncertain**

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We used ABP to identify and compare the vulnerabilities of these three strategies. ABP is a qualitative approach and one of the most important RAND-developed methods for planning under deep uncertainty. ABP is offered as a method for reducing avoidable surprise, by helping decisionmakers rigorously scan for potential vulnerabilities in their plans.

The method starts with the text of a plan and then works through a series of steps to identify explicit and, often more importantly, implicit assumptions underlying the plan. ABP was originally developed to help the U.S. Army adjust its plans toward the end of the Cold War. It has also proved useful for many public- and private-sector organizations (Dewar, 2002).

In this effort, however, we needed to make a variety of important modifications to the method. In particular, the texts of the counterterrorism plans we used were both advocacy and planning documents, so these texts may not be a complete representation of the planners' thoughts. In addition, ABP has been previously applied to single plans. This is the first application designed to compare assumptions across plans.

## Two Types of Assumptions Are of Particular Interest in ABP

- **Load-bearing:** Failure of the assumption would require significant changes in the organization's plans
- **Vulnerable:** Plausible events could cause the assumption to fail within the expected lifetime of the plan

**Key Assumptions** are both load-bearing and vulnerable

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ABP focuses on two types of assumptions:

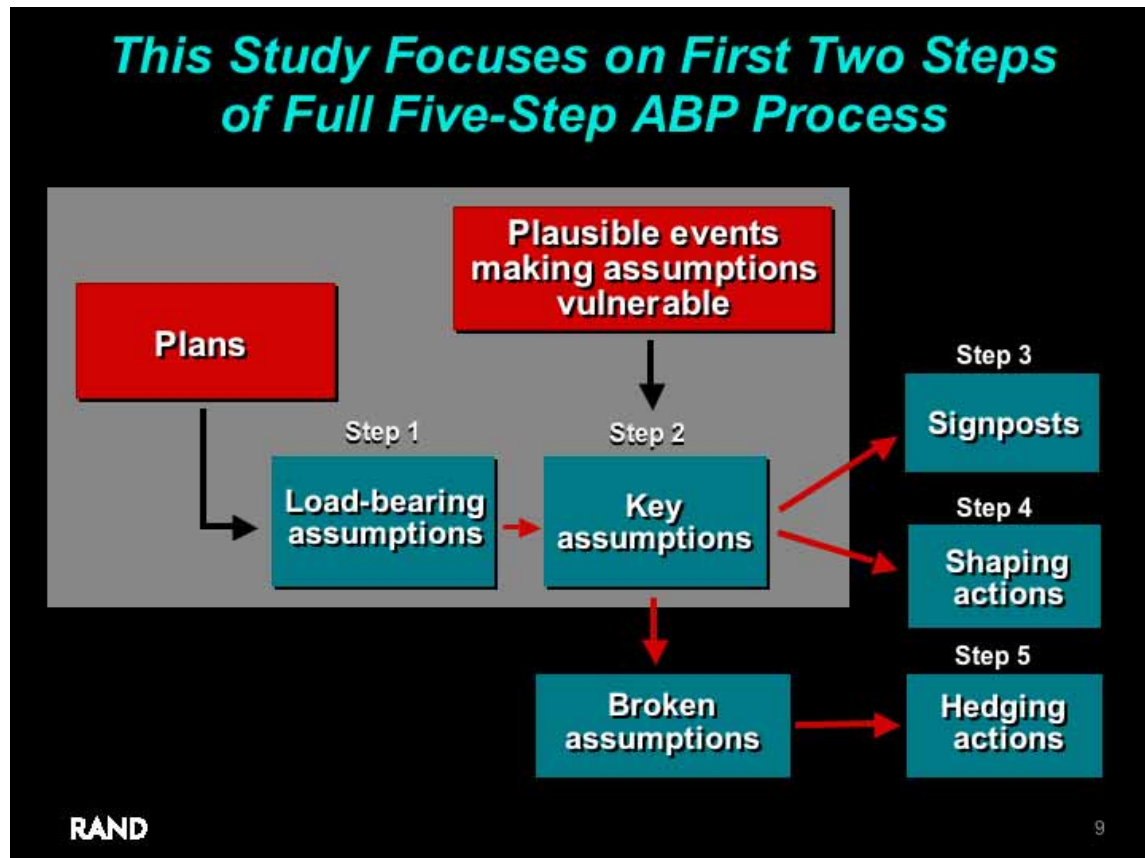
- A *load-bearing assumption* is one whose failure would require significant changes in a plan. The architectural metaphor is meant to hold. A load-bearing assumption is like a load-bearing beam. Pull it out, and the roof caves in.
- A *vulnerable assumption* is one that could fail within the expected lifetime of the plan.

For example, many attendees at RAND briefings often plan to fly home after the meeting. This plan's load-bearing assumptions include that the pilot knows how to fly, that the plane is well maintained, that the traveler gets to the airport on time, and that the plane will leave when scheduled.

All these assumptions appear to be load bearing. Many observers would probably consider the first two as relatively invulnerable and the second two as vulnerable.

We regard assumptions that are both vulnerable and load bearing as the *key assumptions* underlying a plan.





As usually practiced, ABP is a five-step process conducted by a team of professional policy analysts. The team begins with the text of a plan. Using methods described later, they identify on the order of a dozen load-bearing assumptions underlying the plan. They then imagine plausible events that might make one or more of these assumptions fail during the plan's life-time. These vulnerable, load-bearing assumptions represent the key assumptions underlying the plan.

ABP can then suggest actions that decisionmakers might take to improve their plan. Three types of actions can be combined to help make plans more robust against potential failures of their key assumptions (Dewar, 2002).

- *Signposts* provide decisionmakers early warning that an assumption may be failing.
- *Shaping actions* are near-term measures that decisionmakers can take that will make an assumption less likely to fail in the future.
- *Hedging actions* are near-term measures that decisionmakers can take that will better prepare their organization in the event that an assumption does fail in the future.

This study focused on the first two steps of this process, those identifying the key assumptions.

## ***The RAND Project Team Generated an Initial List of Load-Bearing Assumptions***

- Listed **explicit** assumptions and actions in each plan
- Rationalized each plan to identify **implicit** assumptions and actions
- Summarized the findings into concise lists of key actions and supporting “load-bearing” assumptions

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As a first step in organizing these workshops, the RAND project team spent several days making an initial assessment of each plan’s load-bearing assumptions. Dewar (2002) offered a list of about a dozen different ways to find assumptions in plans. We employed two such techniques for identifying load-bearing assumptions.

First, we looked for “wills” and “musts” in the text of each plan. Sentences with these words often state explicit assumptions. For instance the U.S. national strategy states that “the United States *will* confront the threat of terrorism for the foreseeable future” (EOP, 2003, p. 5, emphasis added). This plan thus assumes that the terrorist threat is enduring. Applied to the strategies, this process initially generated a list of dozens of explicit assumptions for each plan.

Second, we organized the assumptions for each plan by category and worked to rationalize the plans. To rationalize the plan, one makes a list of actions and a list of assumptions and then indicates which assumptions are connected to which actions—that is, which actions respond to particular assumptions about the future. Often, the plan will include actions that respond to only a few assumptions. This often points us to implicit assumptions lurking in the plan.

These two processes helped us create lists of many dozens of assumptions for each plan. We then greatly reduced these lists by focusing on the very demanding criteria of load bearing. We identified such load-bearing assumptions by subjecting them to a qualitative “if-then” argument. For each assumption, we asked whether the plan could succeed if this assumption were not true.

## ***Contentious Groups Required Vulnerability Concept to Calmly Debate Load-Bearing Assumptions***

- **Groups generally contained individuals strongly opposed to one or more plans**
- **Such individuals regarded many assumptions underlying plans they opposed as already invalidated by events**
- **Declaring all assumptions potentially vulnerable proved important in enabling calm discussion of load-bearing assumptions for all plans**

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We envisioned that workshop participants would first repeat the RAND team's process to form their own judgments about load-bearing assumptions. Then we expected that the participants would assess the vulnerability of these assumptions.

In practice, the concept of vulnerability proved a necessary precondition for any calm discussion of load-bearing assumptions in our workshops. Most groups included one or more participants strongly opposed to one or more of the plans. For such individuals, many of the assumptions underlying the plans they opposed were, on their faces, implausible and already invalidated by events that had happened as opposed to plausible events that might happen in the future. Only by emphasizing from the beginning of the discussions that all assumptions were potentially wrong could we enable the groups to debate the question of which assumptions were load bearing.

This focus on using ABP to allow contentious groups to reach agreement on the logical structure of alternative plans, rather than help more-unified planners understand potential weaknesses in their plans, differentiates this study from many previous ABP applications. For instance, Lynn Davis et al. (2004) used ABP to identify assumptions underlying the U.S. counterterrorism strategy. That study, in contrast to the current effort, aimed to help those decisionmakers who believed in the plan to understand warning signs of failing assumptions and the anticipatory actions that the United States could take to prevent or manage these potential vulnerabilities.



## **Groups Debated and Revised Lists of Key Assumptions**

### **EXPERT WORKSHOPS**

#### **Prior to workshops**

- **RAND staff prepares initial lists of load-bearing assumptions for each plan**
- **Participants given plans and lists of assumptions**

#### **In group discussion**

- **Participants debate and revise lists of key assumptions for each plan**

#### **After workshops**

- **RAND staff compare and contrast key assumptions**

### **LAY WORKSHOP**

#### **Prior to workshop**

- **Participants given short readings on terrorism**

#### **In group discussion**

- **Participants given summary of plans and initial lists of key assumption**
- **Participants debate and revise lists of key assumptions for each plan**
- **Participants compare and contrast key assumptions**

#### **After group discussions**

- **Each group reports on its comparison and contrast of key assumptions**

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The expert and lay workshops followed similar but not identical steps. The differences owed in part to our initial judgments about the amount of preparation we could expect from the two sets of participants and in part to the fact that we designed the lay workshop after completing and assessing the expert workshops.

Prior to the expert workshops, the RAND team generated initial lists of load-bearing assumptions for each of the three U.S. counterterrorism strategies. The experts received a package of preparatory material about a week before their workshops, including about 30 pages of readings describing each plan and our team's initial lists of assumptions. In their workshops, the expert participants debated and revised these lists. The vast bulk of their discussions focused on the logical structure of the plans—that is, the load-bearing assumptions. By and large, we encouraged them to view all assumptions as potentially vulnerable.

After the expert workshops, the RAND team compared and contrasted the key assumptions for the three U.S. counterterrorism strategies. We first laid out all the assumptions for each plan side by side. Using our understanding of the experts' workshop discussions and choice of phrasing, we then summarized each assumption in language that aimed to emphasize similar and contradictory assumptions for different plans.

Prior to the lay workshop, we sent participants background material, including three short summaries describing the history of the Middle East, the history of terrorism, and an overview of various counterterrorism plans. When participants arrived at the workshop, they received one-page summaries of the U.S. counterterrorism strategies and the lists of key assumptions that the expert workshops produced. In small breakout groups, the lay participants then debated and revised these lists similarly to the way in which the experts had done.

The lay participants devoted part of their breakout-group discussions to comparing and contrasting key assumptions underlying the alternative U.S. counterterrorism strategies. In contrast to the RAND team's efforts with the experts' assumptions, the lay participants did not prepare any comprehensive list of the assumptions from competing plans. Rather, we asked them to suggest the most-interesting similarities and differences among the strategies' assumptions. They responded with a small number of such comparisons and contrasts.

After the group discussions, the lay participants gathered together, and each group reported its comparisons and contrasts to members of the other groups.



## Expert Workshops

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### *OUTLINE*

- Expert Workshops
- Lay Workshop
- Next Steps

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This briefing now presents the results of our expert workshops.

## ***Expert Workshops Reviewed and Revised RAND Team's Initial List of Assumptions***

**Workshop participants made informed judgments on the following questions:**

- **Do the summaries capture the load-bearing assumptions and actions underlying the three plans?**
- **Do the actions follow from the assumptions?**
- **Are the assumptions**
  - **internally consistent within each plan?**
  - **load-bearing?**
  - **vulnerable?**

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In the summer of 2005, we convened two expert workshops, one in Santa Monica and one in Washington, D.C., to vet and improve on the work of the project team. Each workshop had about a dozen experts on terrorism and U.S. foreign and security policies. Some were former and current policymakers, others RAND staff, others academics, and one a producer of documentary films on terrorism.

About a week before their meeting, we sent the participants the questions shown in this slide along with the text of each plan and an initial list of assumptions. The Santa Monica workshop (held in June 2005) received the RAND team's initial assumptions, while the Washington workshop (held in September 2005) received the assumptions that emerged from the Santa Monica workshop.

Each workshop started with about a half hour of scenario rejection, as the participants tried to debate the desirability of the plans. But eventually the participants settled into the activity on which we asked them to focus—debating the assumptions underlying each plan. The two expert groups changed the initial work of the RAND team considerably. Of the 28 assumptions that emerged from the workshops, all but two represent significant rewordings or entirely new assumptions beyond those initially identified by the RAND team. In our judgment, none of the changes represents a significant difference in the interpretation of the plans. Rather, they reflect an iterative refinement of work under expert review. The ability to change the assumptions did appear, however, to significantly increase each group's willingness to accept the results.

In the end, we developed a reasonable consensus—among proponents and opponents—on the logical structure of each plan. That is, the participants generally agreed on what needed to be true about the world for each plan to make sense.

<b>National Strategy for Combating Terrorism</b>	
<b><u>Load-Bearing Assumptions</u></b>	<b><u>Actions</u></b>
<b>Terrorist threat</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Globalized terrorist organizations are a crucial threat to the American way of life</li> <li>Global terrorist organizations garner narrow support in Islamic world and rely on key leaders and resources in a few states</li> </ul>	<b>Pursue a portfolio of actions to localize, render impotent, and destroy global terrorists</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Defeat terrorists</li> <li>– Deny state support</li> <li>– Diminish underlying conditions</li> <li>– Defend the United States</li> </ul>
<b>World conditions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A broad consensus will find terrorism unacceptable</li> </ul>	
<b>Response of other international actors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Other nations will cooperate with the U.S. even when they disagree with some U.S. policies</li> <li>Democracy will reduce the terrorist threat</li> <li>Other governments can effectively contain local terrorist threats</li> </ul>	<b>Emphasize use of military force to topple uncooperative regimes and fight the enemy abroad</b>
<b>U.S. capabilities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The U.S. military can rise to any challenge</li> <li>U.S. has few resource constraints on defeating global terrorism</li> <li>The fundamental behavior of other countries can be changed by U.S. action</li> <li>U.S. public demands their government keep them safe at any cost</li> </ul>	<b>Act preventively and preemptively; establish a low threshold for unilateral action</b>
	<b>Aggressively pursue democratization as a means of denying state support and diminishing underlying conditions</b>
	<b>Enact necessary restrictions on civil liberties</b>

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The next slides display some of the results that the expert workshops generated.

This slide shows the actions and load-bearing assumptions for the U.S. national counterterrorism strategy. We took the actions directly from the published U.S. government strategy (EOP, 2003) and a variety of other official documents and speeches by senior officials. The list of assumptions shown here is that produced by the expert workshops.

We believe that the workshop participants reached broad agreement—among both opponents and proponents of the current U.S. strategy—that these assumptions need to be true for the plan's actions to make sense.

# National Strategy for Combating Terrorism

## Load-Bearing Assumptions

## Actions

### Terrorist threat

- Globalized terrorist organizations are a crucial threat to the American way of life

### Response of other international actors

- Other nations will cooperate with the U.S. even when they disagree with some U.S. policies

### U.S. capabilities

- U.S. has few resource constraints on defeating global terrorism
- U.S. public demands their government keep them safe at any cost

Act preventively and preemptively; establish a low threshold for unilateral action

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This slide demonstrates the concept of load-bearing assumption in more detail.

The arrows link one action to the load-bearing assumptions on which it depends. The action represents one of the more controversial aspects of the current U.S. strategy—acting preventively and preemptively with a low threshold for unilateral action. The phrases on the left represent the load-bearing assumptions for this action.

Two of these assumptions are critical. If other nations will not find it in their interest to cooperate with the United States when they disagree with it, this action could easily cost more than it gains. If the United States has significant resource constraints, this action will likely prove sufficiently costly for the plan to fail.

Two other assumptions are also load bearing if one believes that the United States requires significant justification to incur the potential costs of this action. But we have marked them with dashed lines to suggest that, in some circumstances, preventive and preemptive action could succeed even if these assumptions were not true.





Here is a second example from the U.S. national strategy.

The right column lists the action “aggressively pursue democratization.” This action has four important load-bearing assumptions:

- If the terrorists have significant support in their societies, democratic elections may increase their strength.
- If, for some reason, democracy does not reduce the threat in the near term, this action may fail.
- If newly elected governments cannot contain local terrorists, this action will fail.
- If the United States lacks the power to change the fundamental behavior of other states, attempts to democratize them may fail.

That is, if any of these four assumptions turns out not to be true, the proposed action may fail.

# Enhanced Law-Enforcement and Intelligence Strategy

## Load-bearing assumptions

### **Terrorist threat**

- Terrorists represent only one of many challenges facing U.S.
- Terrorists will not gain strength from perceptions of U.S. weakness

### **World conditions**

- A broad consensus will find terrorism unacceptable
- International institutions are vital and can be made effective

### **Response of other international actors**

- Cooperation from allies can be earned through mutual respect and moral leadership
- Other governments can effectively contain local terrorist threats

### **U.S. capabilities**

- Law enforcement and intelligence can be effective against terrorism
- The fundamental behavior of other countries can be changed by U.S. action
- The U.S. public
  - will appreciate an approach that protects civil liberties
  - will support a significant but nonmilitary response

## Actions

Reduce enthusiasm for and promote the illegitimacy of terrorism by

–demanding respect for human rights in the actions of the U.S. and its allies and

–explaining in vivid ways the horror of attacks on civilians

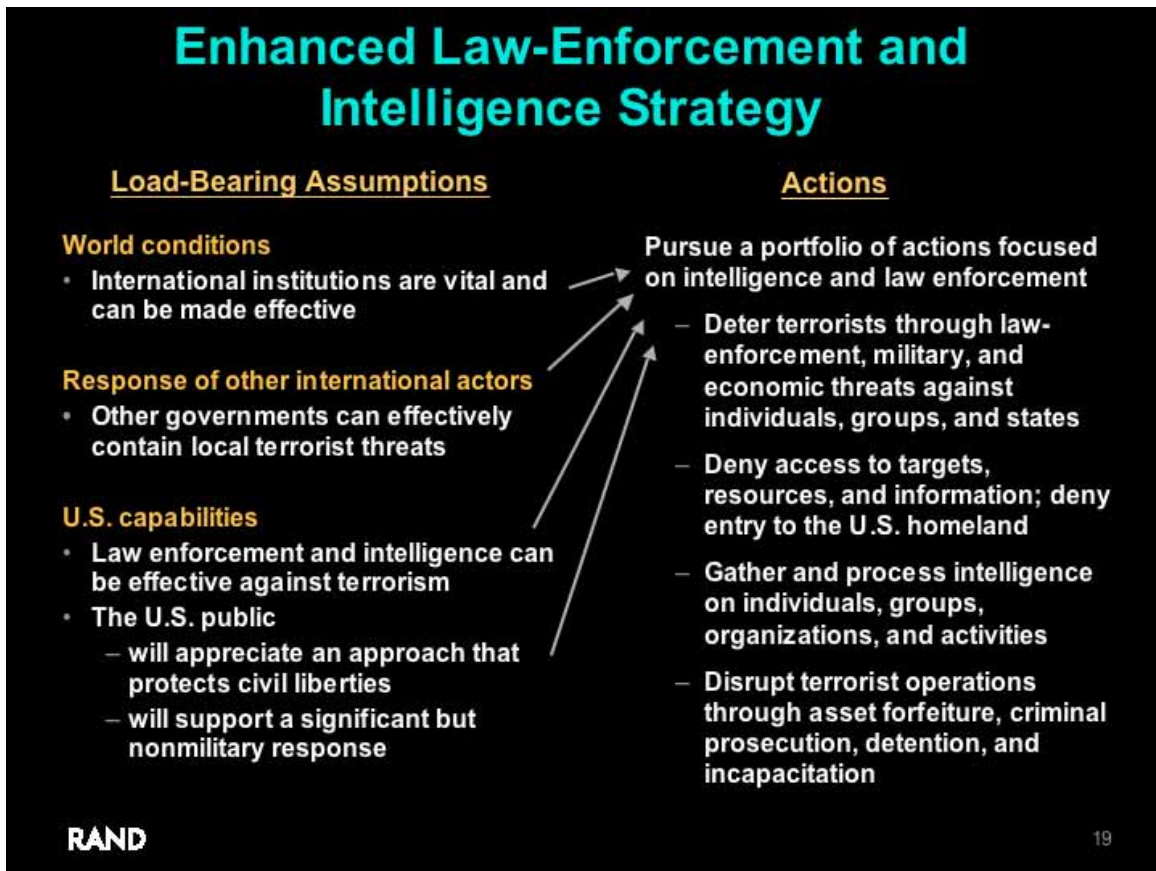
Distinguish among the various threats from terrorism and focus on countering those that are the most threatening

Build a broad worldwide military, legal, and moral commitment to oppose all forms of terrorism, including those that do not directly threaten the U.S.

Pursue a portfolio of actions focused on intelligence and law enforcement

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The other strategies also have significant load-bearing assumptions. This slide shows the actions and load-bearing assumptions that the expert workshops generated for the enhanced law-enforcement and intelligence strategy.



This slide highlights, in greater detail than on the previous slide, one of the key actions in this strategy—pursuing a portfolio of enhanced law-enforcement and intelligence actions to combat terrorism. These actions would be taken by the United States alone or in partnership with other nations. These actions would almost entirely supplant any use of conventional military force.

For instance, these actions will fail if other governments cannot handle the terrorists within their borders or if the U.S. public demands a more violent response to any terrorist attacks.

# Disengagement and Total War Strategy

## Load-bearing assumptions

### **Terrorist threat**

- Global terrorist organizations represent a dangerous insurrection opposed to U.S. policies
- These terrorists will respond favorably to changes in U.S. policies; they will not exploit perceptions of U.S. weakness; they will not be deterred by extensive violence against their societies
- Terrorists are broadly supported and centered in Islamic/Arabic countries

### **World conditions**

- Economic and political costs of greatly reduced U.S. involvement in Middle East are low

### **Response of other international actors**

- Other nations and groups respond only to immutable interests; values do not matter

### **U.S. capabilities**

- The U.S. military can effectively deter and punish
- U.S. public will tolerate the implications of a reduced U.S. presence in the Middle East and unrestrained violence if needed to keep them safe
- U.S. security institutions are not well suited for current threats

## Actions

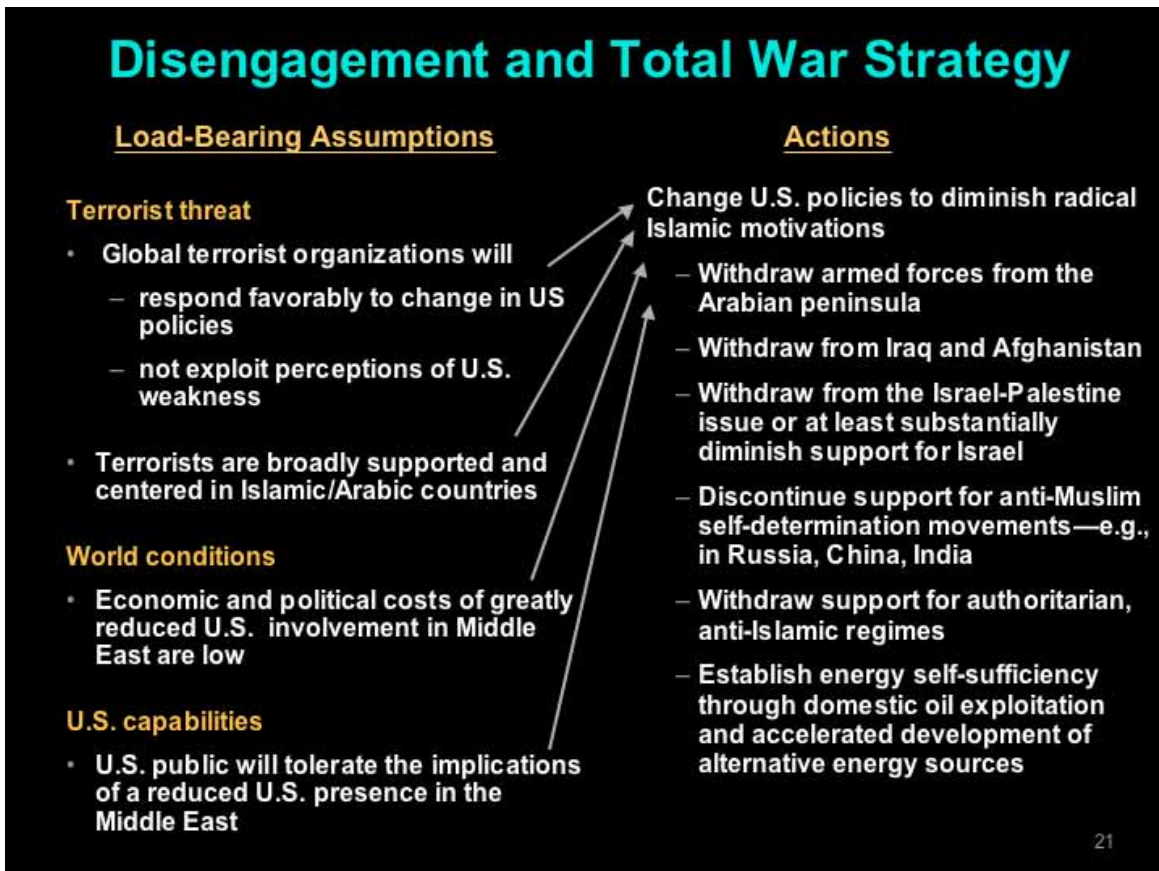
**Change U.S. policies to diminish radical Islamic motivations**

**If changing policies is not effective or possible, conduct all-out war against terrorists, engage in whatever martial behavior is needed to deny the enemy its support base**

**Change U.S. intelligence practices so that expertise and forthright assessments of threats are encouraged**

**Allow other states to fail unless it is in the direct national interest to intervene**

This slide shows the actions and load-bearing assumptions that the expert workshops generated for the disengagement and total war strategy.



This slide highlights, in greater detail than on the previous slide, one of the key actions in this strategy—reducing U.S. political involvement in the Middle East to reduce the motivation that radical Islamic insurgents have for attacking the United States.

These actions will fail if the terrorists do not respond favorably to the change in U.S. policies or if they exploit what they perceive as weakness.

These actions will also fail if there are, contrary to what this plan assumes, significant economic or political costs to a greatly reduced U.S. presence in the Middle East.

As shown in the appendix, the workshops produced similar analyses of key assumptions for each of the actions in all three alternative U.S. counterterrorism strategies.



## Summary of Key Assumptions for the Three Plans

	Current U.S. plan	Enhanced law enforcement	Disengagement
<b>Threat</b>	Global terrorist organizations are a critical threat to American way of life.  These organizations garner only narrow support in Islamic world. They rely on key leaders and resources in a few states.	Terrorism is one threat among many.  Terrorists will not gain strength from perceptions of U.S. weakness.	Global terrorist organizations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– represent a dangerous insurrection opposed to U.S. policy.</li> <li>– will respond to changed U.S. policies, not exploit perceived weakness, and be deterred by violence.</li> <li>– are broadly supported in Islamic world and centered in Islamic lands.</li> </ul>
<b>World conditions</b>	Broad consensus will find terrorism unacceptable.	Broad consensus will find terrorism unacceptable.  International institutions can be effective.	Costs of changing current policies are low if U.S. were to greatly reduce its involvement in the Middle East.
<b>Response of other actors</b>	Others will cooperate with U.S. even when they disagree. Democracy reduces threat. Other governments can contain local threats.	Cooperation can be earned.  Other governments can contain local threats.	Other nations and groups respond only to immutable interests; values do not matter.
<b>U.S. capabilities</b>	U.S. military can rise to any challenge. U.S. has few resource constraints. U.S. action can change behavior of other countries. U.S. public demands government spare no expense to keep it safe.	Law enforcement and intelligence can be effective. U.S. action can change other countries. U.S. public values civil liberties and will support a nonmilitary response.	U.S. military can deter and punish.  U.S. public will tolerate reduced Middle East presences and unrestrained violence.  U.S. security institutions are not well suited for current threats.

After the expert workshops, the RAND project team gathered together all the key assumptions for each of the three plans.

Comparing and contrasting these assumptions can help us better understand the strengths and weaknesses, the commonalities and differences, among the plans.

The Plans Make Different Assumptions About the Threat			
	Current U.S. plan	Enhanced law enforcement	Disengagement
<b>Threat</b>	Global terrorist organizations are a critical threat to American way of life.	Terrorism is one threat among many.	Global terrorist organizations represent a dangerous insurrection opposed to U.S. policy.
<b>World conditions</b>			
<b>Response of other actors</b>			
<b>U.S. capabilities</b>			

In many cases, the plans rest on very different assumptions. For instance, the plans take different views of the nature of the terrorist threat to the United States.

The U.S. national plan assumes that the new terrorism represents an existential threat opposed to U.S. concepts of liberty and modernity. Because these terrorists seem willing to cause massive casualties, the plan assumes that the terrorist threat is the most important danger that the United States faces.

The disengagement strategy sees the terrorists as insurgents at war with the United States because they oppose specific U.S. policies. The terrorists are very dangerous, but they have a political agenda.

The enhanced law-enforcement strategy argues that treating the struggle against terrorists as a war will prove ineffective against the threat and damaging to U.S. civil liberties. The plan also sees terrorism as a summary label that includes a wide variety of threats, some much more dangerous than others. Overall, this plan assumes that terrorism is only one of many serious problems that the United States faces.

## In Some Cases, Key Assumptions Are Shared Across Plans

	Current U.S. plan	Enhanced law enforcement	Disengagement
<b>Threat</b>			
<b>World conditions</b>	Broad consensus will find terrorism unacceptable.	Broad consensus will find terrorism unacceptable.	
<b>Response of other actors</b>	Other governments can contain local threats.	Other governments can contain local threats.	
<b>U.S. capabilities</b>	U.S. action can change behavior of other countries.	U.S. action can change behavior of other countries.	

Interestingly, these very different plans share some significant key assumptions. In particular, the U.S. national strategy and the enhanced law-enforcement and intelligence plan share some interesting similarities.

Both plans assume that a broad consensus among the world's peoples will find terrorism an unacceptable means to pursue any ends. In both plans, this assumption underlies actions designed to win the war of ideas.

Both plans assume that human societies can be improved and that the United States can play a key role in helping other people improve their societies.



Each Plan Has Key Assumptions Whose Validity Is Challenged in Other Plans			
	Current U.S. plan	Enhanced law enforcement	Disengagement
Threat			
World conditions			
Response of other actors	Other nations will cooperate with the U.S. even when they disagree with some U.S. policies.		
U.S. capabilities	U.S. has few resource constraints on defeating global terrorism.		

For the most part, however, each plan has key assumptions whose validity is strongly denied by adherents of the other plans.

For instance, the U.S. national strategy assumes that other nations will find it in their own interest to cooperate with the United States whether or not they agree with U.S. actions. Proponents of the law-enforcement plan argue vigorously that the cooperation of other nations cannot be coerced because it is too easy to pretend to cooperate when one is actually not. Proponents of the disengagement plan argue that nations look out only for their own narrow interests and that the United States should never expect much cooperation.

The U.S. national strategy also assumes that the United States has few resource constraints in its fight against terrorism. The law-enforcement plan emphasizes the allocation of scarce resources. The disengagement plan strongly cautions against wasting U.S. blood and treasure.

## Each Plan Has Key Assumptions Whose Validity Is Challenged in Other Plans

	Current U.S. plan	Enhanced law enforcement	Disengagement
<b>Threat</b>			
<b>World conditions</b>		International institutions can be effective.	
<b>Response of other actors</b>		Cooperation can be earned.	
<b>U.S. capabilities</b>		Law enforcement and intelligence can be effective.	

The enhanced law-enforcement and intelligence strategy assumes that international institutions can be made effective. The other two plans reject this assumption.

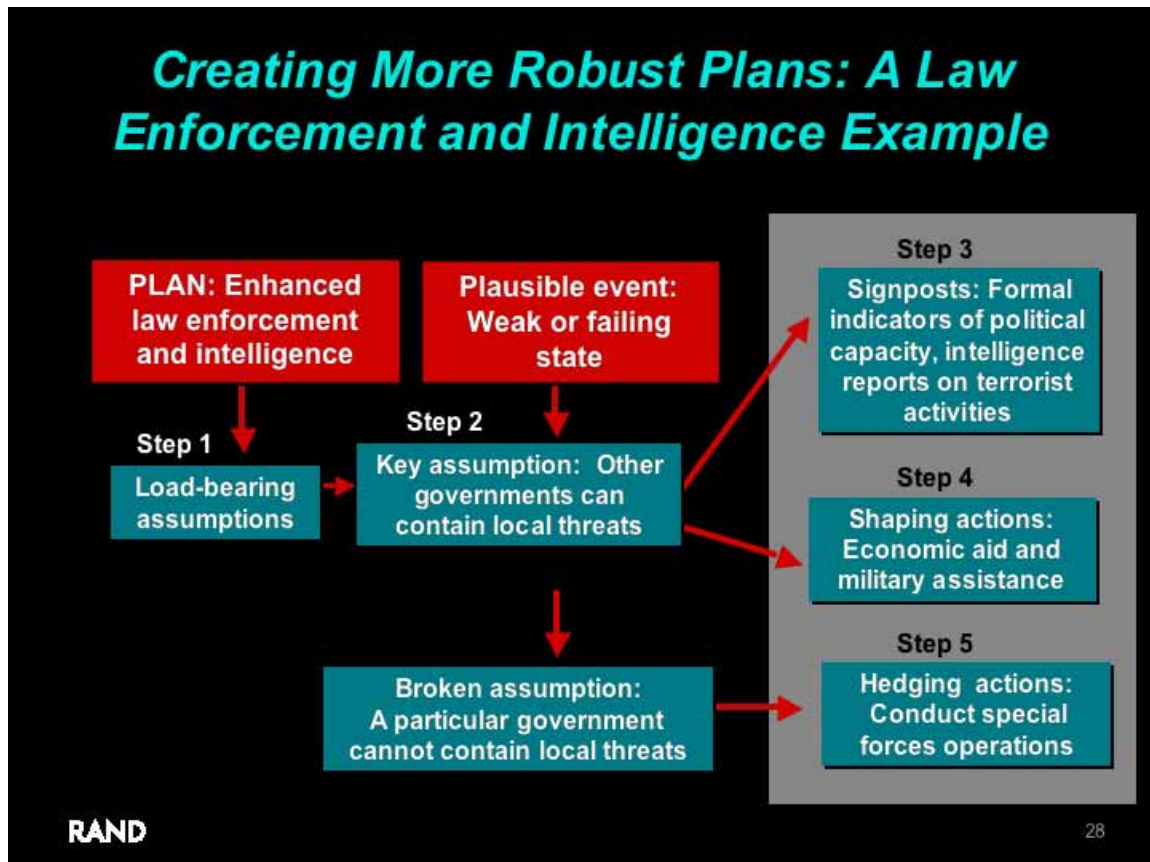
The law-enforcement strategy assumes that the cooperation of other nations can be earned through mutual respect and through moral leadership provided by the United States. The U.S. national plan rejects this assumption as too restrictive, while the disengagement plan rejects it as too optimistic.

The law-enforcement plan also assumes that law enforcement and intelligence can be made effective against the most serious terrorist threats. The other two plans disparage this view and believe that military force will ultimately be required.

Each Plan Has Key Assumptions Whose Validity Is Challenged in Other Plans			
	Current U.S. plan	Enhanced law enforcement	Disengagement
Threat			
World conditions			Costs of changing current policies are low if U.S. were to greatly reduce its involvement in the Middle East.
Response of other actors			Other nations and groups respond only to immutable interests; values do not matter.
U.S. capabilities			

The disengagement strategy assumes that the economic and political costs of dramatically reducing the U.S. presence in the Middle East are low. Both the U.S. national strategy and the enhanced law-enforcement strategy reject this claim, arguing that the United States must remain strongly engaged in an increasingly globalized world.

The disengagement strategy assumes that nations respond only to their own interests and that values do not matter. Both the U.S. national strategy and the enhanced law-enforcement strategy see responding to other nations' values as an important part of winning the struggle against terrorism.



This comparison and contrast makes clear that all three of the plans examined have a significant number of important and potentially vulnerable load-bearing assumptions. No plan seems robust against potential failures and surprises. Clearly, it would be helpful to identify ways to reduce these vulnerabilities.

ABP can help identify more-robust plans. It provides a means to examine one or more plans individually and find ways to reduce each plan's vulnerabilities.

Participants in the Washington, D.C., expert workshop used the three final steps of the ABP framework shown on page 11 to suggest ways in which the enhanced law-enforcement and intelligence plan might be made more robust.

For instance, they suggested several signposts for this strategy's key assumptions, including formal indicators of the political capacity of other governments to effectively contain local terrorist threats and intelligence reports on any potential upsurge in terrorist activities.

The group also suggested shaping actions, such as economic aid and military assistance, which would increase other governments' ability to effectively contain local terrorist threats.

The group also suggested hedging actions, such as special forces operations, which could compensate for other governments' failure to contain local threats.

This activity suggests that ABP can usefully identify ways to make plans more robust.



### *OUTLINE*

- Expert Workshops
- Lay Workshop
- Next Steps

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Now we turn to the workshop with lay audiences.

## ***Lay Workshop Had Range of Goals***

- **Introduce a RAND-developed method for planning under conditions of deep uncertainty**
- **Discuss some key trade-offs among alternative U.S. counterterrorism strategies**
- **Enrich the public debate**
- **Learn whether the methodology is helpful for broad audiences**

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In July 2007, the RAND team and the League organized a daylong event that used ABP to examine the key assumptions underlying several alternative approaches to U.S. counterterrorism strategy.

The RAND team and the League had several goals. The two organizations hoped to introduce lay participants to a commonly used RAND methodology for strategic planning under conditions of deep uncertainty and to help participants use this approach to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of alternative approaches to a complicated and often emotionally charged public-policy issue. The RAND team hoped to learn how helpful this method might prove with lay participants. The League hoped to add a new tool to its portfolio of approaches to conducting public-policy workshops nationwide. Both organizations hoped to contribute to and improve the public policy debate.



## Conducted Workshop in Collaboration with League of Women Voters

- **Seventy lay workshop participants:**
  - **Heard talk by RAND terrorism expert Brian Jenkins titled *Life Is War: The Operational Code of Al Qaeda***
  - **Received briefing on ABP**
  - **Met in facilitated small groups to:**
    - **Review key assumptions in strategies**
    - **Discuss similarities and differences among strategies' assumptions**
  - **Completed pre- and post-workshop surveys**

**RAND**

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RAND and the League gathered more than 70 participants in RAND's Santa Monica office for this daylong session.

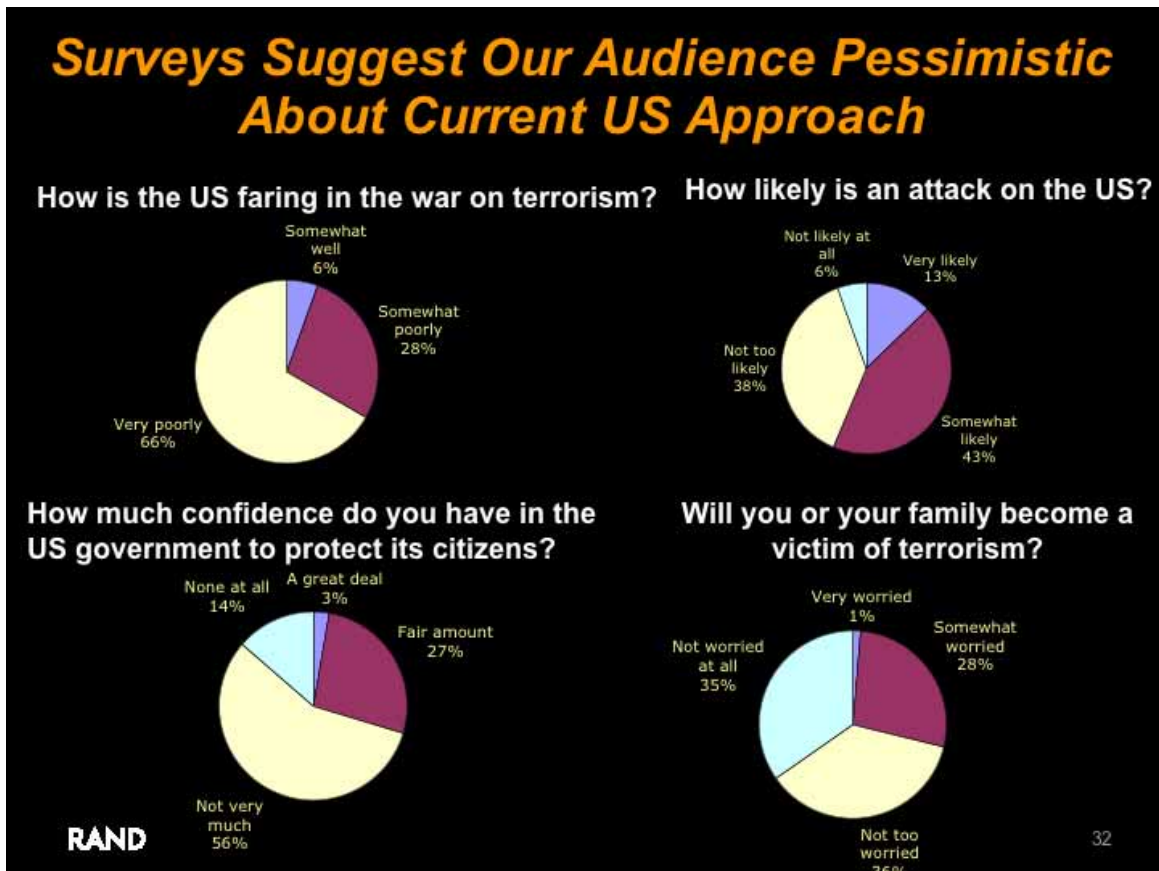
Prior to the meeting, participants were sent three short descriptions of the history of the Middle East, of the terrorist threat, and of proposed strategies to address this threat (see League, undated). On arriving at RAND, participants heard a talk by terrorism expert Brian Jenkins laying out his view of the terrorism threat. Participants then broke for lunch and an opportunity to meet and talk among themselves. Afterwards, they reconvened and received a briefing, similar to the one in this document, describing the ABP approach. Participants then divided into pre-assigned breakout groups of about 12 to 15 each. Each breakout group was given written summaries of the strategies and the results of the expert workshops as shown in this document's appendix. Each group was asked to review the key assumptions underlying the strategies and to discuss the similarities and differences among each strategy's assumptions. Either a RAND staff member or a trained facilitator from the League led each group. After these breakout-group sessions, which lasted about two hours, the participants all reconvened, and each group reported back on its comparison of the similarities and differences among the plans' key assumptions.

As an important feature of this effort, we administered formal surveys to each participant, one as they arrived in the morning and one before they left at the end of the day. We used these surveys to measure how the workshop had influenced the participants' understanding and views of U.S. counterterrorism strategy.

In addition to the three strategies that the experts considered, the lay workshop also included a fourth plan because it was of particular interest to some of our League partners.



This gap-to-core strategy, based on *Blueprint for Action: A Future Worth Creating* by former U.S. Navy War College professor Thomas Barnett (2006), holds that terrorism most often originates in nations that are outside the core of the globalized world and that these “gap” nations will cease to promote and support terrorism only when they are brought into the “core” (Barnett, 2006). Workshop participants were given a summary of this plan that was similar to that provided for the other three. Because we had no list of key assumptions from the expert workshops for the gap-to-core plan, we gave the breakout groups the option of developing such assumptions from scratch if they wanted to use some of their time for this purpose. However, the groups had insufficient time for the central tasks we gave them, so while many participants seemed interested, the gap-to-core strategy generally received less consideration than the other three.



The surveys administered at the start of the workshop provided us a snapshot of the participants' views when they first arrived. Overall, they were pessimistic about the current U.S. approach to terrorism.

The pie chart in the upper left indicates that, at the start of the workshop, nearly two-thirds of respondents thought that the United States was currently faring poorly in the war on terrorism. The pie chart on the lower left suggests that more than half had little confidence in the U.S. government's ability to protect its citizens. The two charts on the right suggest that, while more than 50 percent of respondents thought that a terrorist attack on the United States was likely, less than a third worried that such an attack would directly affect them or their families.

## Breakout Groups Compared Key Assumptions

	Current U.S. Plan	Enhanced Law Enforcement	Disengagement
<b>Threat</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>US at war with terrorists opposed to our way of life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>US facing criminal organizations, is not at war</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>US at war with insurgents opposed to US policies</li> </ul>
<b>World Conditions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>US must engage internationally, cannot withdraw</li> <li>Broad majority find terrorism unacceptable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Underlying conditions are important</li> <li>Broad majority finds terrorism unacceptable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>US can withdraw internationally without serious consequences</li> </ul>
<b>Response of Other Actors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>International cooperation is important and guaranteed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>International cooperation is important and must be earned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>International cooperation unnecessary</li> </ul>
<b>US Capabilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moral high ground is imperative and strong</li> <li>US has sufficient resources to act alone</li> <li>Public will continue to support military action</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moral high ground is imperative but fragile</li> <li>US lacks sufficient resources to act alone</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>US has sufficient resources to act alone</li> <li>Public will continue to support military action</li> </ul>

RAND

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The seven breakout groups focused on two tasks: (1) reviewing and amending the list of key assumptions developed during the expert workshops and (2) comparing and contrasting the key assumptions of the alternative strategies.

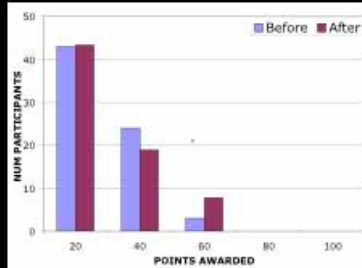
Four of the seven groups had as facilitators RAND staff who have used ABP in their own work and had previously run ABP workshops with experts. Three groups were led by League members with extensive experience facilitating public policy discussions but no previous familiarity with ABP. Prior to the workshop, the RAND team held an afternoon training session for the League facilitators, during which they were introduced to ABP and led through a practice exercise developing key assumptions for the gap-to-core plan. Nonetheless, our surveys suggest that there was a sometimes significant difference among the RAND team- and League-led groups in their ability to organize the group discussions within the ABP structure.

The seven breakout groups spent most of their two hours discussing the proposed key assumptions underlying the national, law enforcement, and disengagement plans. Each group changed or added an average of six assumptions for these three plans. Some groups also spent 15 to 30 minutes generating key assumptions for the gap-to-core plan.

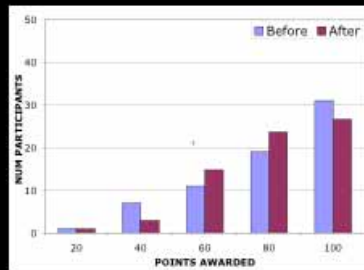
The groups were given sheets with blank matrices whose rows and columns were labeled as those on this slide, on which they were asked to record what they thought were the most interesting and important similar and contrasting key assumptions among the plans. We asked each group to perform this task as its main deliverable, but due to time constraints no group seemed to spend more than a half hour or so conducting it. In the final session, when all participants reconvened to report on their discussions, we focused on collecting these comparisons and contrasts among assumptions.

The lay workshop's lists of key assumptions and its comparison and contrast among them showed results largely similar those of the expert workshops. There were some differences, but the lay and expert workshops were sufficiently dissimilar to know whether these differences are significant. For instance, lay participants appeared to identify assumptions about moral claims more frequently than the experts and focus less often on assessments about the capabilities of international institutions and foreign governments. For instance, one lay group suggested, as one key assumption underlying the current U.S. strategy, that the United States currently occupies the moral high ground and will continue to do so no matter what actions it takes. The experts phrased similar ideas somewhat differently. But any differences between the lay and expert groups may reflect the fact that the experts had the opportunity to read much more detailed written descriptions of the three plans and had more time during their workshops to discuss them.

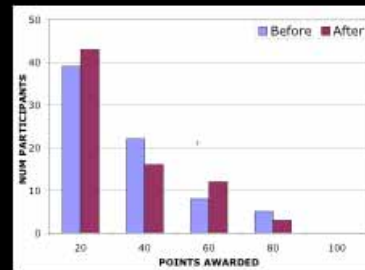
## Expressed Views on Strategies Only Shifted Slightly By the Workshop ...



**US national strategy**



**Law Enforcement**



**Disengagement**

**RAND**

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While changing views was not an explicit goal of the workshop, we were interested in observing whether participants' views did change over the course of the event. In particular, we asked participants at the beginning and end of the day to rank how much they favored each of the three alternative U.S. counterterrorism strategies.

As shown on this slide, the participants reported little change over the course of the workshop in their views about the strategy that the United States ought to pursue. Each participant was given 100 points and asked to distribute them among the strategies. For instance, if a participant was completely sure that the United States ought to pursue the current U.S. strategy, he or she would give this strategy all 100 points. If a participant favored all strategies equally, each would receive 33 points. The panels on this slide show the number of participants (vertical axis) that gave each strategy a certain number of points (horizontal axis) before (blue bars) and after (red bars) the workshop. As an example, note that, before the workshop, 31 participants gave the law-enforcement strategy more than 80 of their points. After the workshop, 27 participants gave this strategy more than 80 of their points.

The panels show that, when most participants arrived at the workshop, they favored the law-enforcement strategy, followed by the disengagement and U.S. national strategy as a distant second and third. After the workshop, the participants still strongly favored the law-enforcement strategy. But they tended to be slightly less confident about their views. Fewer participants gave the law-enforcement strategy more than 80 points. The number of participants giving less than 40 points to any strategy dropped and the number giving roughly equal points (between 40 and 80) to all strategies increased.

It is interesting to speculate why the workshop did not have more of an effect in changing the participants' favored strategy. One possibility is that all three strategies we discussed have serious weaknesses and the information presented at the workshop provided little reason to switch from one strategy to another. Thus, if participants perceived before the workshop that the law-enforcement strategy was the most reasonable of the three strategies offered, most should still favor it at the end. Given where they started, there was simply no reason to expect that the actual content of the workshop would persuade them to change their views. We might test this by repeating the workshop with an additional and potentially more robust strategy (the League members who pushed to include the gap-to-core strategy in our exercise appeared to favor it over the other three). Alternatively, we might allow the workshop participants to complete the final step of the ABP process and suggest actions that might reduce the vulnerabilities of one or more of the strategies. We could then measure whether participants would favor adopting these additional actions.

Other factors may also have come into play beyond the specific content of the workshops. For example, presenting materials to read in advance and then measuring attitudes at the start of the workshop may have induced the participants to feel that they had made a commitment to their positions. Social psychologists have found that the act of stating a commitment to an attitude or position (such as "committing" to a position by filling out the preworkshop questionnaire) may create subsequent resistance to attitude change. Further, publicly stating a position (such as in an identifiable questionnaire or in a group session) makes one even more resistant to changing it. In subsequent workshops, it might be interesting to collect premeasures in a randomly selected half of the participants and omit them in the other half to see if this affects attitude change.

Social psychologists have also suggested that many attitudes are not held randomly and dispassionately but are tied into a person's ego constellation. Certain attitudes are cherished because people consider them to be defining of who they are—a liberal, a conservative, an ethical person, a political realist. Because such attitudes are tied to the self-concept and people do not like to change their self-concept, they are especially resistant to change. In this workshop, changing attitudes may have appeared to be a repudiation of a strongly held position (for example, moving from opposing to supporting the policies of the current administration), and that may have increased resistance to change. Another aspect of this may be an unwillingness to admit that a single workshop could change their beliefs—even if the experience did launch them on a path that would subsequently cause them to revise their opinions. If they perceive their attitudes to be the result of well-reasoned and strongly held beliefs, changing them so quickly might make them feel that they are a flip-flopper on these issues, and that might be inconsistent with their self-concept. In subsequent workshops, we might attempt to measure how participants define themselves and observe any relationships to change or lack of change. We might also measure other shifts in opinions about or understanding of the alternative strategies during the course of the workshop, such as the extent to which the ABP exercise helped participants gain a better understanding of the weaknesses of the strategy they favor and the strengths of the strategies they oppose.



## ***... But Participants Reported Improved Ability to Consider Complex Problems***

- **Written reports in surveys, our observations, and verbal comments suggest ABP helped participants**
  - Discuss a controversial topic without fighting
  - Gain a deeper understanding of alternative plans
  - Scan for the vulnerabilities in alternative plans
- **Participants seemed generally pleased with event**
  - Some reported subsequent use of ABP in other areas
  - Main complaint was insufficient time and reading material to consider plans in sufficient detail

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While the participants did not change their views about the best strategy to pursue, they did report a deeper understanding of the terrorism problem and an increased appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches proposed to address it.

The surveys asked participants to describe in what ways the workshop caused them to change their views about counterterrorism policy. In a typical response, one participant wrote that the workshop “had deepened my knowledge of alternative approaches.” Another participant wrote that the workshop provided “an interesting way to get people together to discuss an issue like terrorism without dissolving into fights.” In a discussion after the workshop, one participant said that he had always followed a process like ABP in his business career but had never before thought of applying it to what he read in the newspapers. In written feedback that the League collected several weeks after the event, some participants reported using ABP in other applications.

In contrast to the experts in their workshops, the lay participants did not begin the breakout sessions with scenario rejection. The latter appeared to have less need to state strongly held positions before turning to a discussion of assumptions. As in the expert workshops, ABP provided a useful device for defusing what might have become confrontational comments. Occasionally, participants would launch into an attack on one or another strategy but responded effectively (if sometimes grudgingly) when asked to turn their criticism into a statement about an assumption. It proved far easier to discuss and often agree on the latter (an assumption) than on the former (a strategy).

Overall, the participants seemed pleased with the workshops. Many expressed a desire for more time to discuss and to have been given more background readings, in particular more

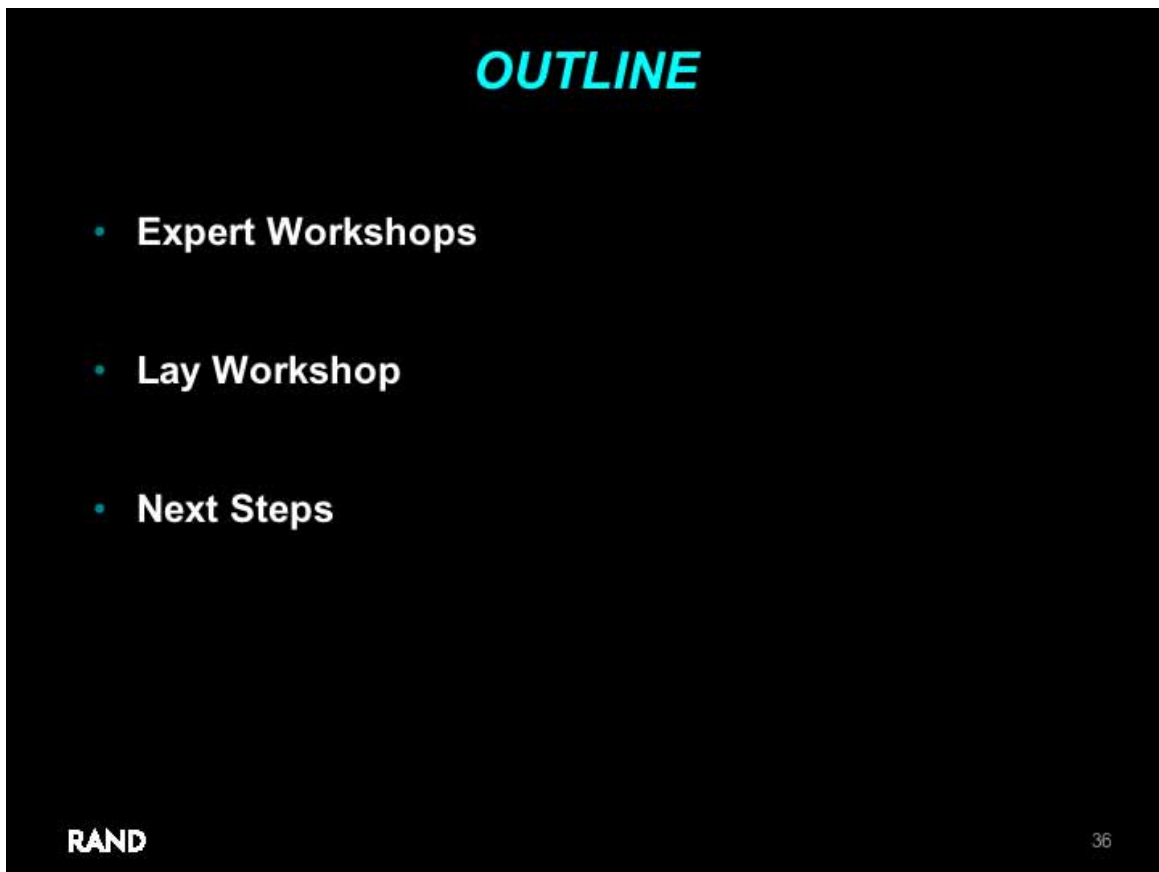
detailed descriptions of the strategies discussed. One asked for more Brian Jenkins and less ABP workshop, but most seemed closer to the sentiment expressed by one participant that people are used to thinking in terms of policies as good and bad, right and wrong, and welcomed the opportunity to try to objectively compare alternative approaches.





## Next Steps

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We hope that the workshops described here are only a first step. RAND researchers and the League hope to conduct more such sessions on counterterrorism strategy with lay participants across the United States. In addition, in the wake of the initial expert workshops, RAND has conducted similar ABP exercises on a range of topics, including hurricane protection in New Orleans with members of the Army Corps of Engineers, the Louisiana state government, and other various stakeholders, and on the role of natural gas in Israel's energy future with members of that country's government and energy industry.

Our initial experience with these counterterrorism workshops provides some useful lessons on ways to improve future ABP workshops and to improve any surveys conducted to measure the effects of such workshops.

Overall, the workshops appear to support our hypothesis. ABP did help facilitate discussion and consensus among groups of experts. The approach helped individuals who held very different views of the best plan to dispassionately discuss the fundamental assumptions underlying different plans. It provided participants with a structure for finding the implicit, sometimes vulnerable assumptions, in these plans. Interestingly, we found that the assumptions that a plan's advocates most often put forth are not its load-bearing assumptions. Often, the arguments for a plan focus on undercutting the rationale for alternative plans. While this may be effective rhetoric, it is not very helpful for revealing the vulnerabilities of the plan under consideration.

The workshops also suggested some substantive results. All three boats are leaky. Each of the alternative plans considered has significant, vulnerable, and load-bearing assumptions. The workshops also suggest interesting similarities and differences in the key assumptions underlying alternative plans. For instance, all three plans make different assumptions about the seriousness and nature of the terrorist threat. However, both the current U.S. strategy and the enhanced law-enforcement strategy assume that a broad consensus of the world's peoples will find terrorism unacceptable and that the United States can play a key role in helping other people improve their own societies.

## ***Assumption Based Planning Helped Facilitate Debate Over U.S. Counterterrorism Strategies***

- **ABP helped groups that disagree about the best U.S. approach to counterterrorism**
  - Dispassionately discuss the logical structure of alternative approaches
  - Compare and contrast key assumptions
- **Workshops suggest all plans considered**
  - Have significant vulnerabilities
  - Often rest on conflicting assumptions
  - Sometimes share common assumptions

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Our experience suggests a number of lessons learned that might improve future workshops.

First, future lay workshops could be improved by giving participants more background material before the sessions and more discussion time during it. Participants in the expert workshops were sent full texts of the alternative plans, about 100 pages of reading, a week before their session. They seemed satisfied with this background material and well able to discuss the various plans. Participants in the lay workshop were sent three short papers before the session, only one of which provided a discussion of the alternative strategies. The lay-workshop participants were also given a one-page summary of each strategy when they arrived in the morning. Many participants in the lay workshop wrote that they were frustrated by not knowing more about the strategies and requested more readings in advance of the session. In future workshops, we plan to send participants readings similar to those we sent the experts.

Second, the expert workshops offered about three hours for the discussion, while the lay-workshop breakout sessions had only two. We plan to hold future lay workshops over the course of two days. Ideally, participants would gather in the evening for an orientation to the terrorist challenge, the workshop, and to ABP. The next morning, they would return for their breakout sessions. This agenda would give participants both more time for discussion and more time to absorb the orientation material.

Third, we might observe more effects of the workshops on participants' views if we measured more subtle changes of opinion than a wholesale shift of allegiance from one strategy to another. For instance, we could allow participants to use the ABP process to suggest ways to ameliorate the weaknesses of the strategies and ask whether they were willing

to adopt these new actions. Alternatively, we could ask participants whether the workshops changed their opinions of the strengths and weaknesses of the strategies.

Finally, it would also be useful to hold future workshops with people with a wide range of prior views about current U.S. counterterrorism strategy—in particular, ones different from those held by the majority of the participants at this lay workshop.

## ***Lessons Learned for Future Workshops***

- **Future workshops with lay participants should**
  - **Distribute full texts of alternative plans prior to the meeting**
  - **Meet over two days to provide more time for consideration and deliberation**
  - **Provide more training for facilitators**
- **Future workshop surveys should**
  - **Focus less on measuring changes in views about the best strategy**
  - **Focus more on measuring changes in understanding of strategies a respondent opposes**

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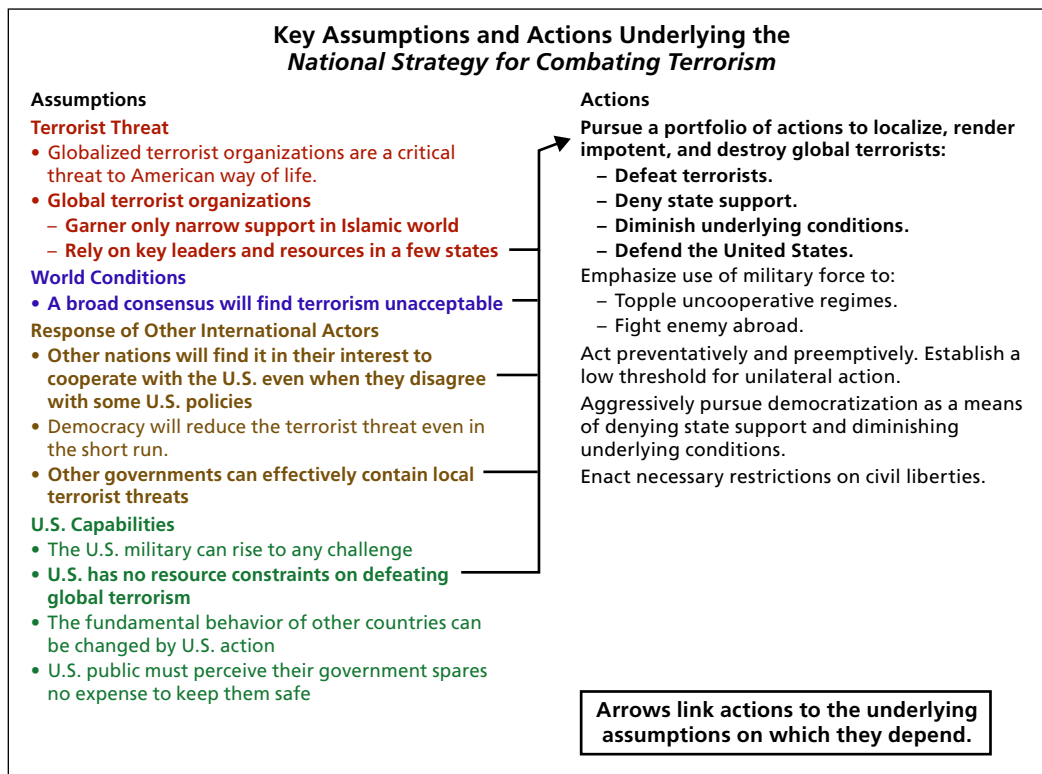
ABP appears to provide a useful approach for identifying key assumptions underlying U.S. counterterrorism strategies. The method can help contentious groups of expert and lay participants agree on the logical structure of alternative strategies even when they disagree about the relative merits of each strategy.

Hopefully, the methods demonstrated here could prove useful in improving public debate and helping the United States address terrorism and the other significant, long-term, and novel challenges it faces at the dawn of the 21st century. We intend to test this proposition in more such workshops in the future.



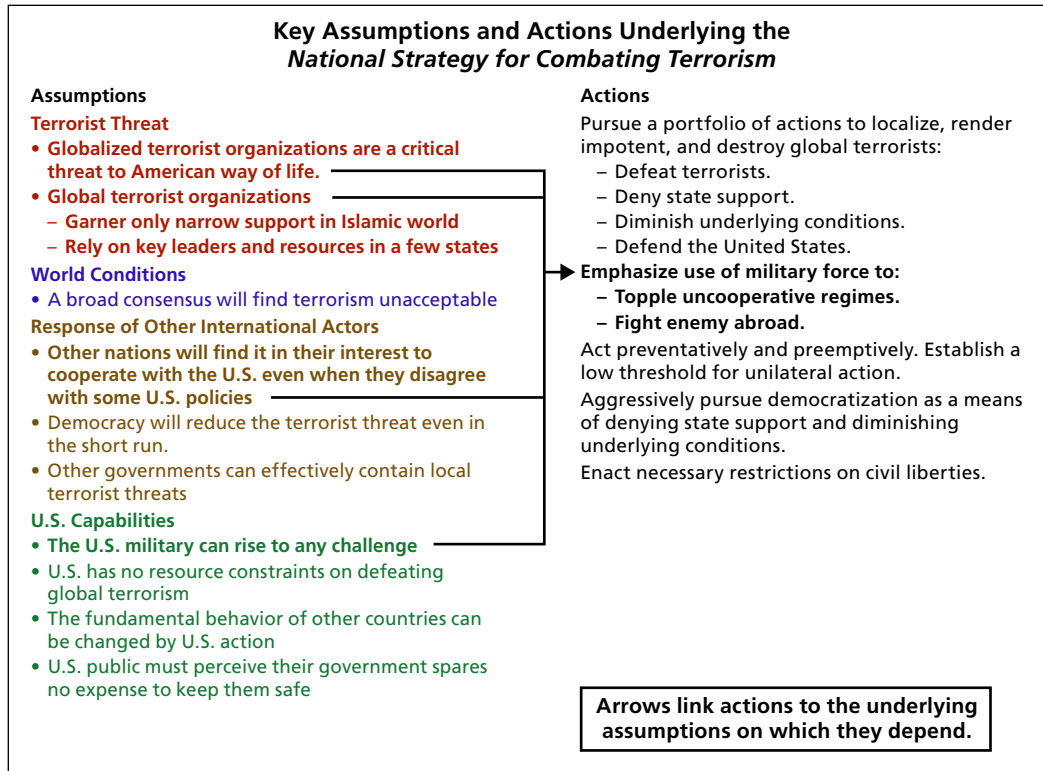
## Key Assumptions

This appendix shows the key assumptions and the actions they support that were generated during our expert workshops. Participants in the lay workshops were given these figures as part of their package of supporting materials.

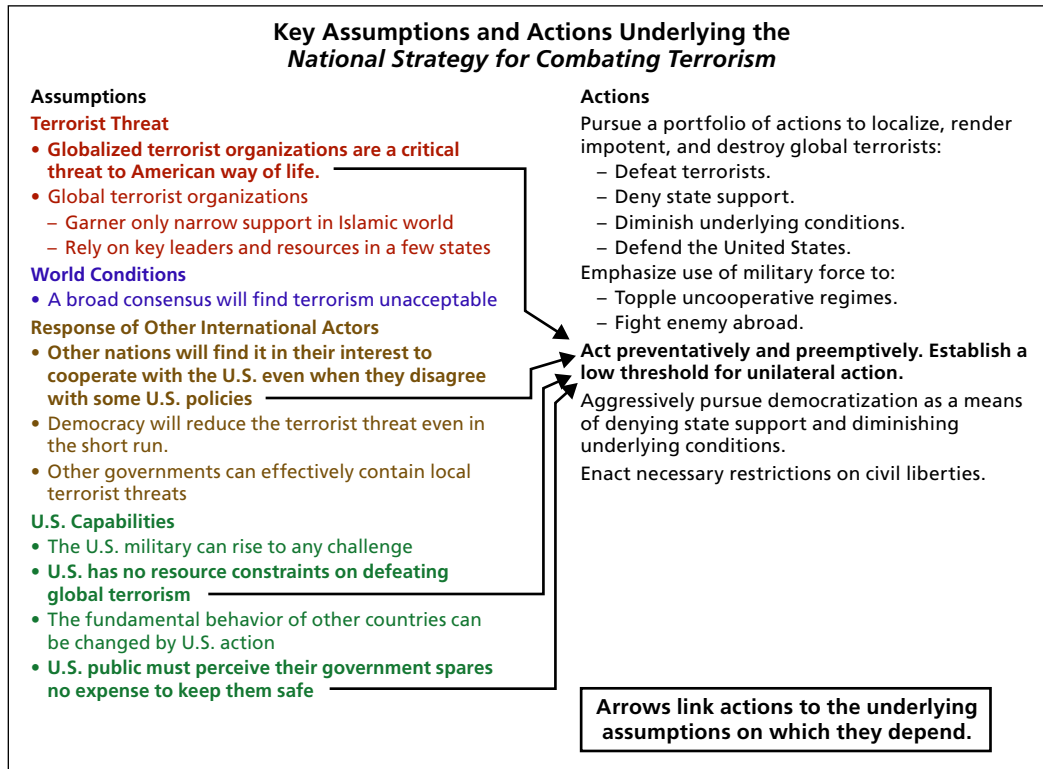


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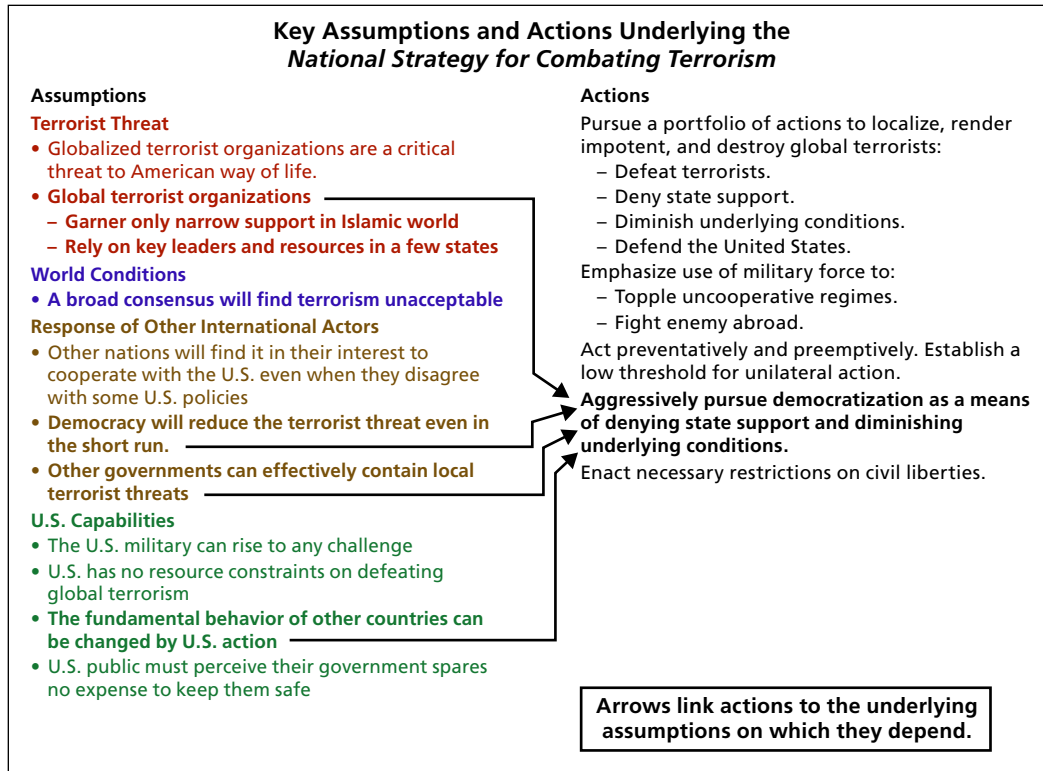




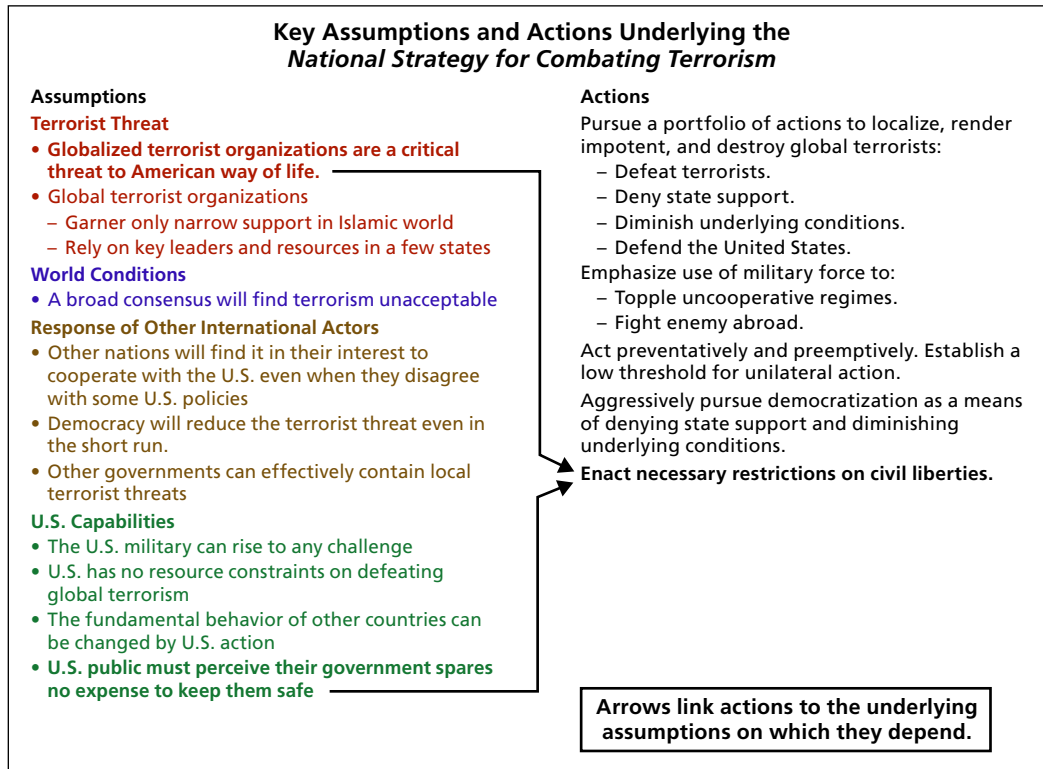
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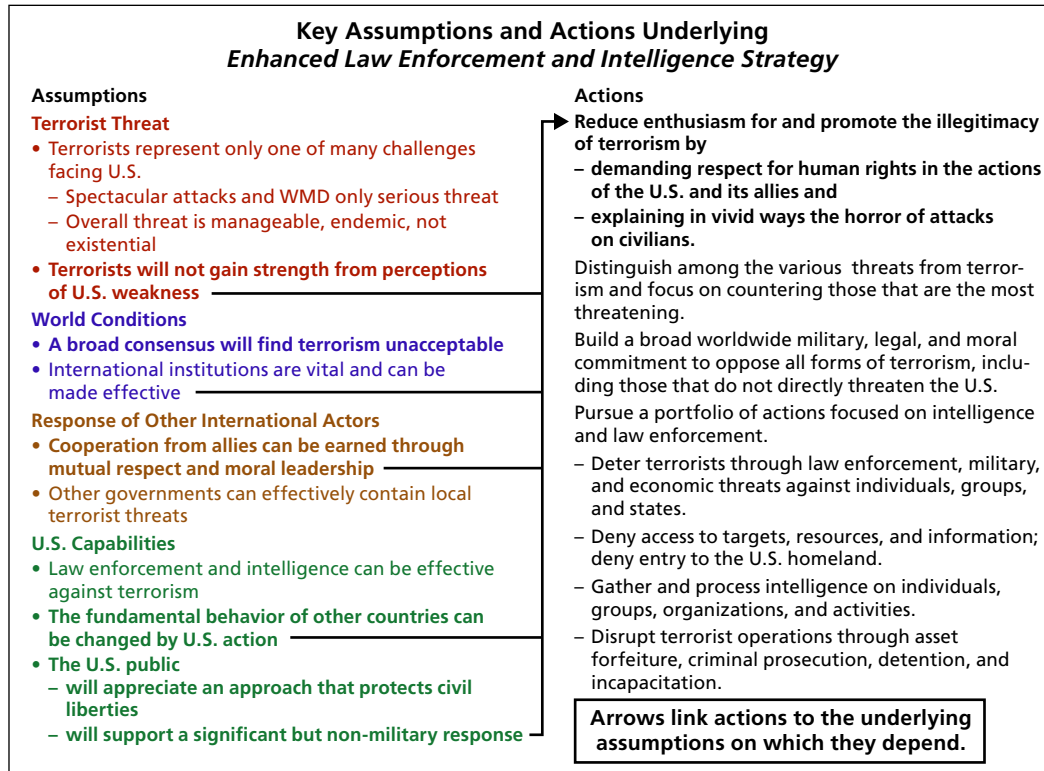
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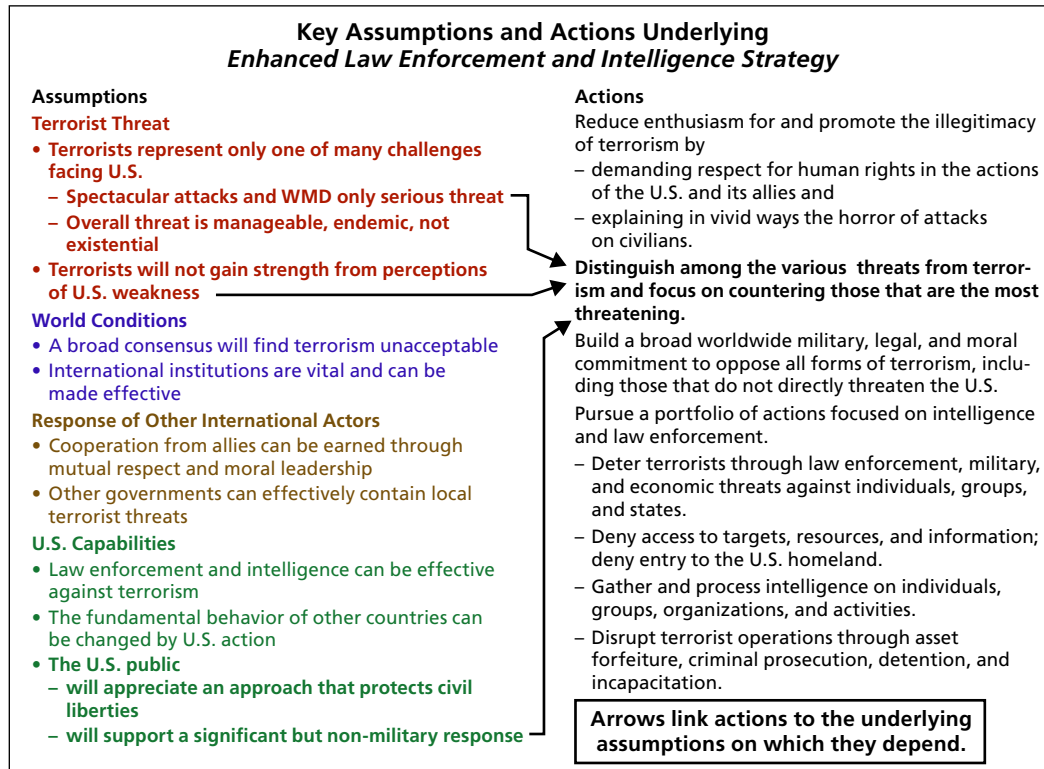
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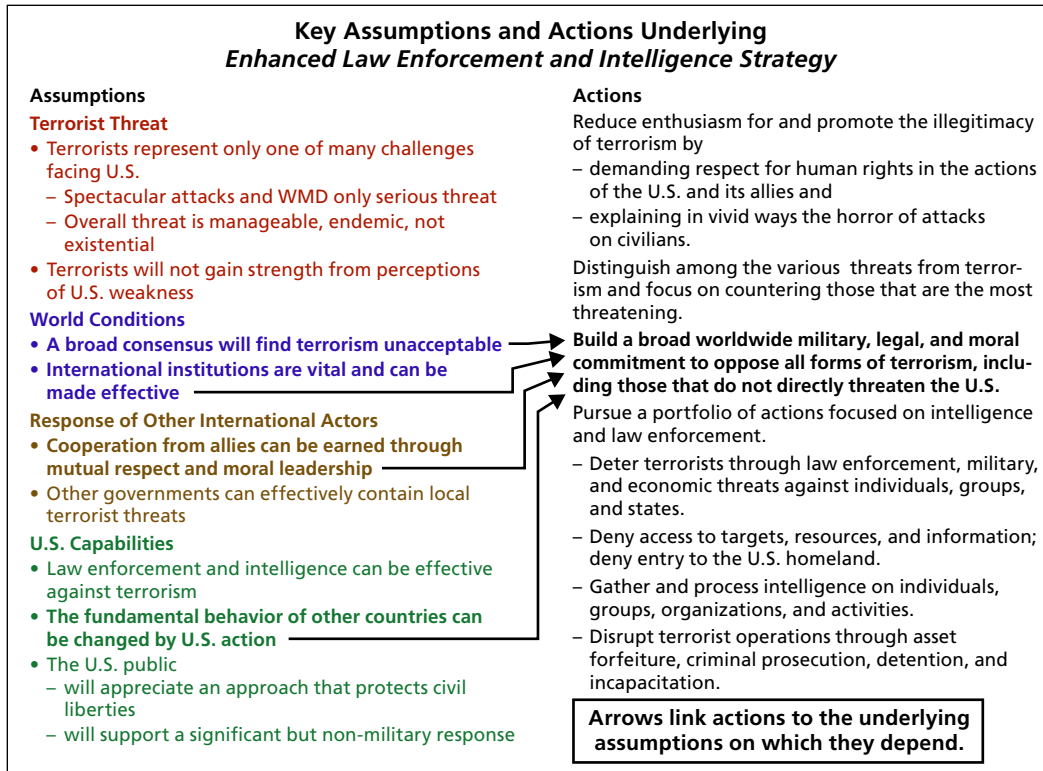
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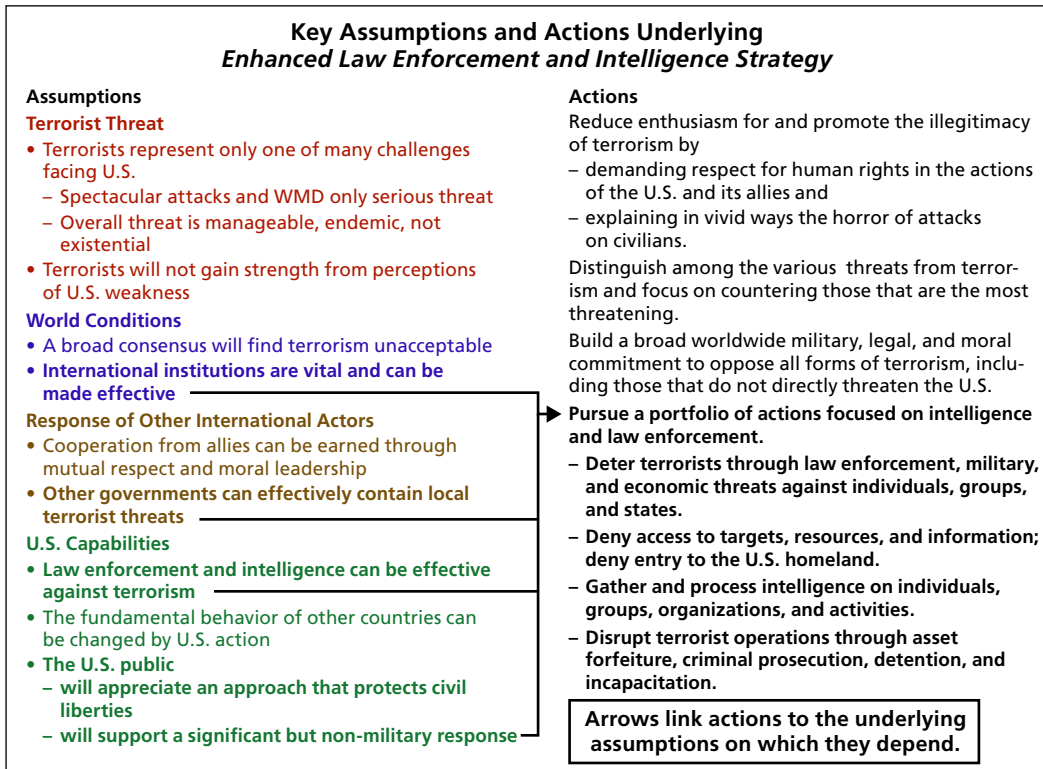
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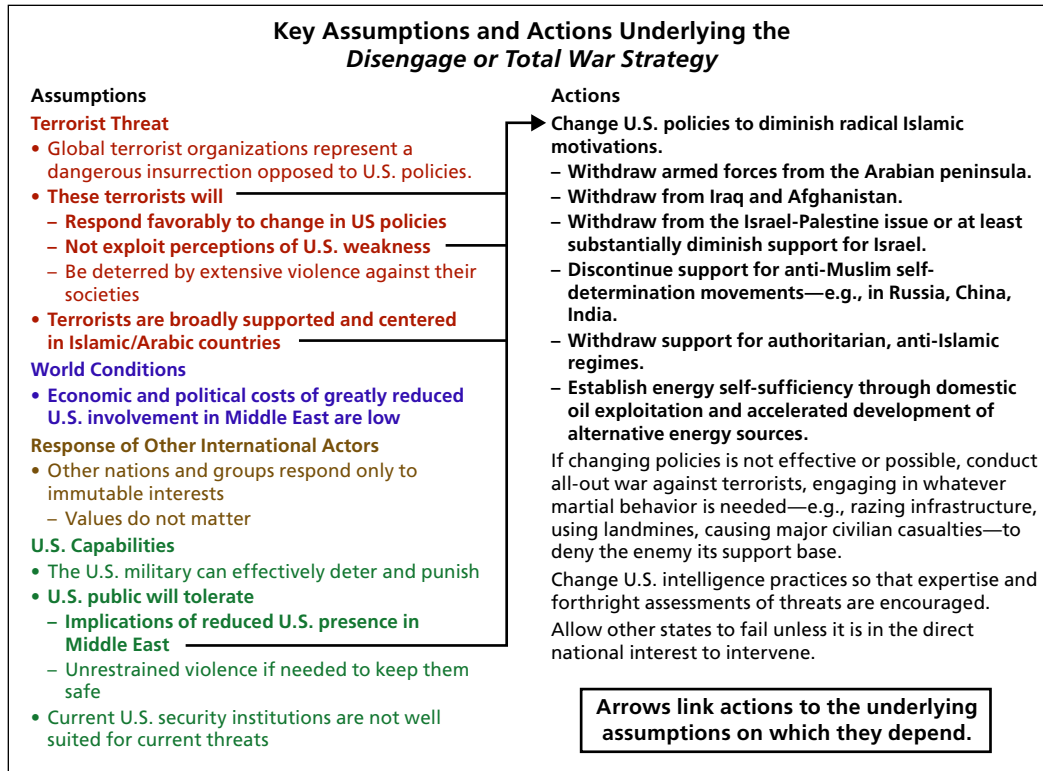
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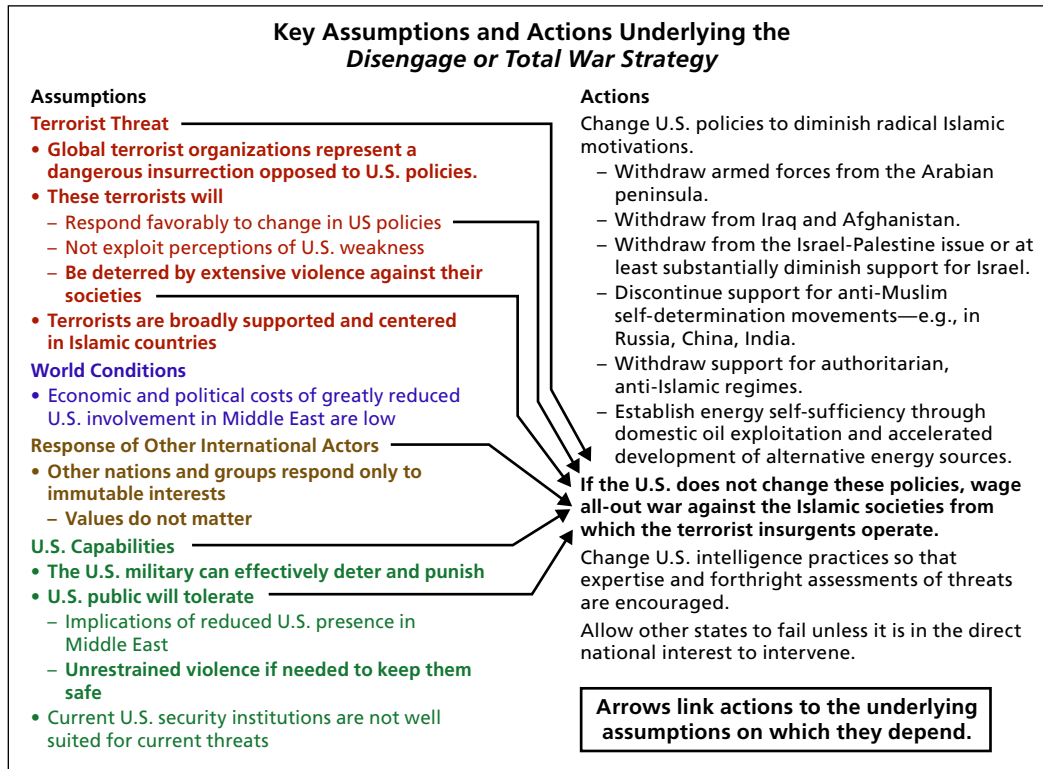
RAND DB548-2c



RAND DB548-2d



RAND DB548-3a



RAND DB548-3b

### Key Assumptions and Actions Underlying the *Disengage or Total War Strategy*

#### Assumptions

##### Terrorist Threat

- Global terrorist organizations represent a dangerous insurrection opposed to U.S. policies.
- These terrorists will
  - Respond favorably to change in US policies
  - Not exploit perceptions of U.S. weakness
  - Be deterred by extensive violence against their societies
- Terrorists are broadly supported and centered in Islamic countries

##### World Conditions

- Economic and political costs of greatly reduced U.S. involvement in Middle East are low

##### Response of Other International Actors

- Other nations and groups respond only to immutable interests
  - Values do not matter

##### U.S. Capabilities

- The U.S. military can effectively deter and punish
- U.S. public will tolerate
  - Implications of reduced U.S. presence in Middle East
  - Unrestrained violence if needed to keep them safe
- Current U.S. security institutions are not well suited for current threats

#### Actions

Change U.S. policies to diminish radical Islamic motivations.

- Withdraw armed forces from the Arabian peninsula.
- Withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Withdraw from the Israel-Palestine issue or at least substantially diminish support for Israel.
- Discontinue support for anti-Muslim self-determination movements—e.g., in Russia, China, India.
- Withdraw support for authoritarian, anti-Islamic regimes.
- Establish energy self-sufficiency through domestic oil exploitation and accelerated development of alternative energy sources.

If the U.S. does not change these policies, wage all-out war against the Islamic societies from which the terrorist insurgents operate.

**Change U.S. intelligence practices so that expertise and forthright assessments of threats are encouraged.**

Allow other states to fail unless it is in the direct national interest to intervene.

Arrows link actions to the underlying assumptions on which they depend.

RAND DB548-3c

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